WINSTON CHURCHILL

argosy

a new
MAIGRET

H. E. Bates
Ray Bradbury
S. J. Perelman

JANUARY 3/-
Price in Australia

argosy

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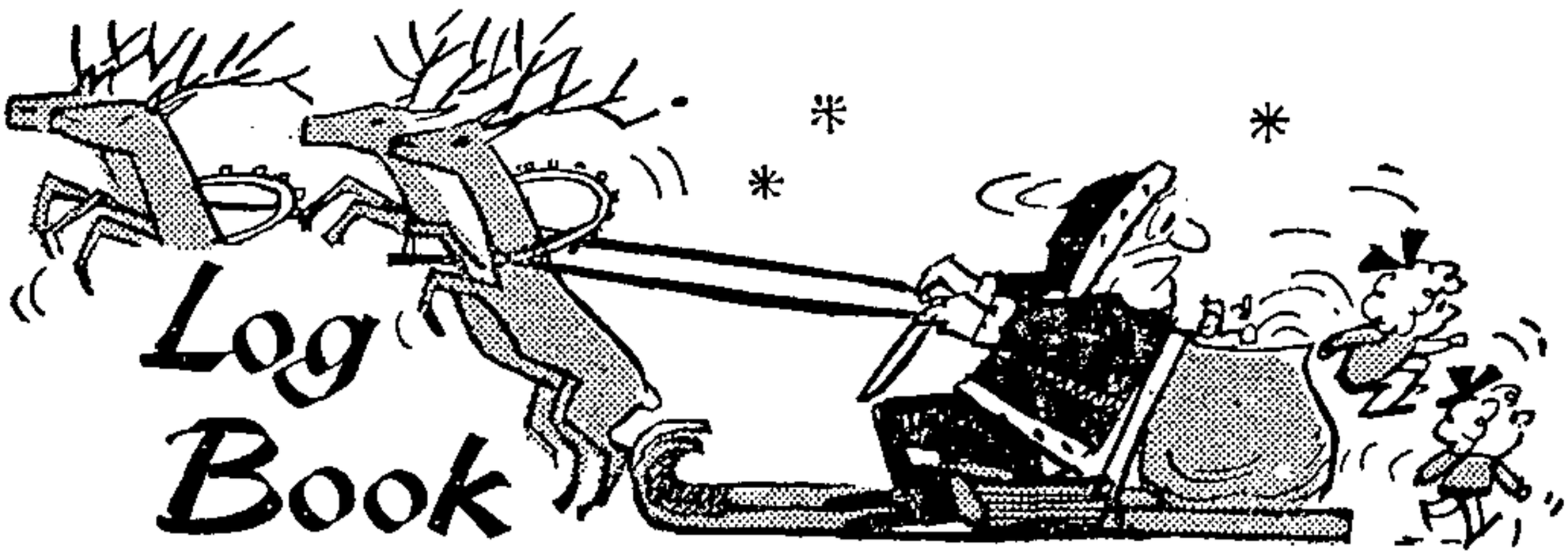


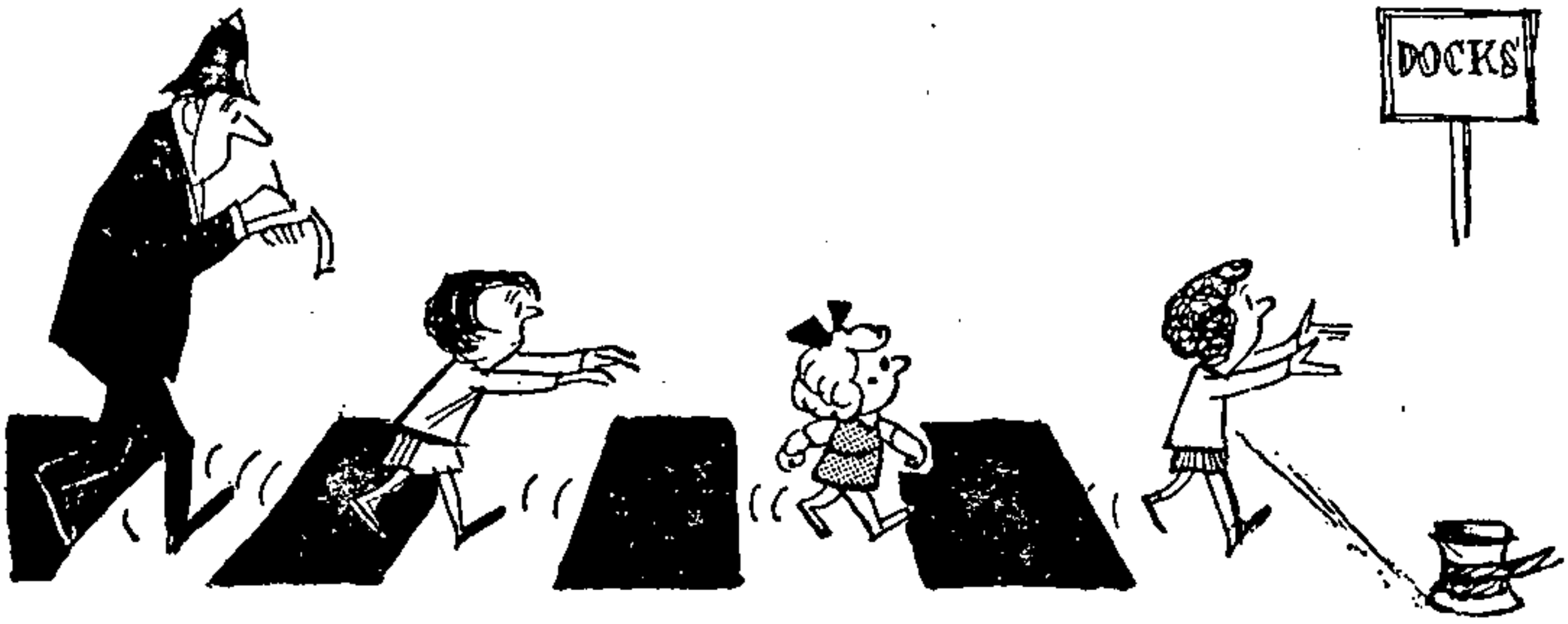
YOUR child will be amazed, the advertisement says. What at? Why, at the doll you are giving him/her this Christmas. Besides rooted hair and antiferromagnetic structure, a Bardot expression, and a Lolita wardrobe, this doll has a vocabulary of three words and can walk a mile—all on a small torch battery.

Our guess is that this last attribute will really floor the tots; none of the TV-addicted offspring of our acquaintances has *ever*, in *any* circumstances, been known to walk a mile. Fetched by bus to school, ferried hither and yon by dutiful parents, children today are almost totally non-ambulant, and loud will be the howls, we reckon, in many a Christmas household as the doll sets off down the road without its tiny owner—unless parents are at hand to fix the creature's wavelength on a boomerang beam.

And think of the traffic problems on Christmas Day!

Matters are bad enough now, even with penalties for jay-walking pedestrians, but when a few hundred thousand aimlessly strolling dolls are let loose in the highways, chaos really will be complete; and not much use fining them fifty pounds either! A new series of Acts of Parliament will be urgently needed.

The explanation for this state of affairs, of course, is that these dolls are not dolls at all, but computers, spy-computers, distributed under the aegis of the sinister Doktor Nein, himself half-man, half-computer. (This sounds much worse than being either one or the other, don't you agree?) Obviously computers



are on the point of making an all-out bid to conquer humanity, via the Christmas stockings of countless unsuspecting families.

The prospect is cheerless. There is something very unlovable about computers: their shape is so incoherent, their habits so finicking, their voices so toneless.

We were particularly depressed by one which sang on TV:

The more we are together, the merrier we shall be,

For your friends are my friends, and my friends are your friends . . .

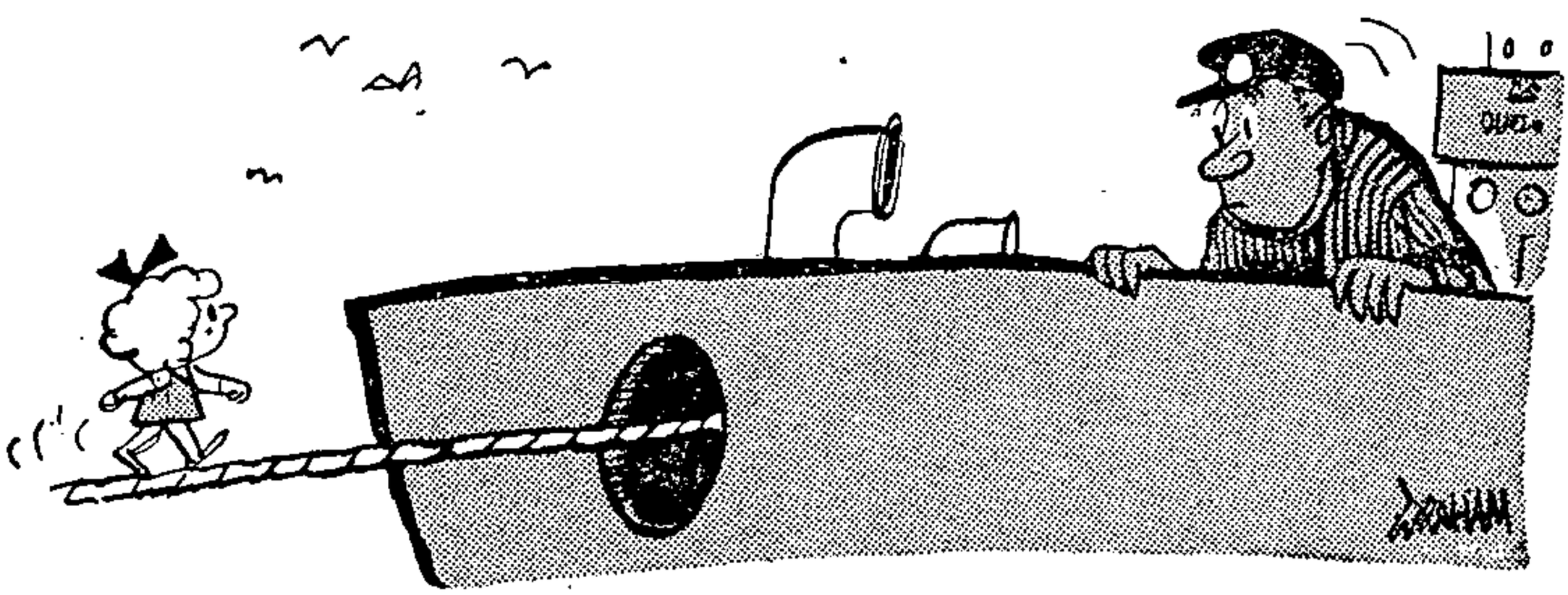
in a melancholy, quavering alto which, to us, totally failed to carry any conviction. No friend of a computer, we felt like asserting, is a friend of ours; there seems something inherently friendless about computers—it's hard to imagine them hand-in-hand dancing ring-a-rosy, or clapping each other on the back over pints of old and mild.

However we did feel more sympathy for another computer which, after dutifully marshalling goods trucks about a shunting yard, indignantly proclaimed on its tape: SOMEBODY HAS PINCHED A TRUCK. There seemed, to us, something hopeful in the use of that word *pinched*—something human and hot-tempered. We felt much kinship with a machine that flew into a rage when it was beaten at draughts. There's a chance that we can come to terms with them if they can be humanised and learn to share our mental ups and downs. Perhaps computers *need* friends, and a body should be formed—The Friends of Computers—to help them limber up their emotions.

At present laughter is a notable gap in their equipment. No computer has ever been known to chuckle over I *Timothy* ii, 9, or roar with hearty mirth when it wins at chess.

So, parents, strike a blow for mankind by programming your children's computer-dolls to an appreciation of humour. Tell them little jokes every day, show them cartoons. Enrol them as subscribers to Argosy. And, for a start, why not read aloud to them the story on page 48?

JOHN SILVER



The Old Eternal

by H. E. BATES

EVERY year the elderly Miss Rigby and the slightly older Miss Pinkerton, affectionately known to each other as Spud and Pinkie, celebrated some part of Christmas by having a few glasses of port, a slice of plum cake, and a wedge of Cheshire cheese in the old air raid shelter that still stood, after so many years, under their bottom garden wall.

"Sort of thanksgiving for what we got through at the time," they would explain.

Late in the autumn, after the leaves of the pumpkins that always grew on the roof of the shelter had been blackened to sloppy pulp by the first frosts, Pinkie raked off the old dead vines, scrubbed down the interior corrugated iron with strong carbolic soap, and opened the door for several days to give the shelter what she called "a bit of a sweetener."

Pinkie was small, very cherubic and fierily red in the face, with light blue eyes that protruded eagerly like little silver thimbles. After a few drops of what she called "the you know what" she glowed hotly, with positively mustard-like excitement, and chattered with panting merriment, looking like a breathless Pekinese. In the household she rushed from object to object in sniffing and palpitating pursuit, as if everywhere seeking a hidden bone.

Miss Rigby, Spud, was neither so active nor so lucky. She was big, slow, imperturbable, and misshapen. Her face was so like a large discoloured potato that the name Spud really suited her. She suffered, among other things, from painful swellings of the legs, chronic shortness of breath, and false teeth that didn't fit very well and continually got gummed together by pieces of marshmallow, her favourite sweetmeat. But these minor pains

"Well, cheers! Here's to Christmas and the best of luck in the future"

never discouraged her and she waddled everywhere with wheezy and jovial optimism, sometimes carrying large orange pumpkins about, nursing them in her arms like fat babies to which she had miraculously given birth.

In the shelter all the antique paraphernalia of wartime—the war was so far away and yet sometimes seemed like only yesterday—was preserved as it always had been: stirrup pump and two buckets, one of water and one of sand, torch, candle in its holder, whistle, and even a pair of gas masks neatly hung in their khaki bags on the wall.

A small square window, its glass of the kind that is reinforced with wire, gave out on to the garden, and here Spud and Pinkie sat on the afternoon of Christmas Eve, gazing at the damp earth outside, sipping port wine and munching on cake and cheese.

" We always seem to have good weather," Pinkie said. "Goodness knows what we'd do if it snowed."

" Of course you know what we'd do if it snowed," Spud said. " We'd sit here just the same. It would take more than that to put us off."

" I suppose so. I suppose so. I suppose it would, Spud dear."

" Do you remember how it snowed in 1940?" Spud said. " We got snowed in and there were enormous drifts and we couldn't get out again."

They laughed in chorus at this: Spud rather like a deep French horn, Pinkie like a cymbal.

" And I blew so hard on the whistle to get Mr. Ackerly to come and dig us out, I thought I'd blow my teeth out," Spud said. " I always say that's what first loosened them."

They laughed again at this and Pinkie poured more port. It didn't seem like Christmas until they were well on with the port and they could hear the evening bells across the town. The candle always made a difference too, and presently Spud said, " Let's have the candle alight, shall we, Pinkie? I love the glow of the port in the candlelight."

" I'll do it, Spud dear, I'll do it. Don't move."

In the candlelight it was not only the port that glowed. Pinkie glowed too, a fiery little cherub flashing silver thimble-eyes.

" Funny how the candle all of a sudden makes it seem dark outside," she said. " And then you see that wonderful blue in the sky. And the first stars."

"They say the band will be coming this way on Christmas Eve this year," Spud said, "instead of Christmas morning."

"Oh, do they? I didn't put their Christmas box ready. You think I ought to pop back and get it in case they arrive?"

"No, no. Sit still. We shall hear them when they come."

"You mean we will if we don't drop off. You remember the year we both dropped off? And slept through that awful raid? Sound as babies. And everybody said how ghastly it was."

They laughed again at this stirring and hilarious memory and Pinkie poured out a further drop of port. War was awfully funny, really, depending on how you looked at it.

"I don't see it starting to rain, do I?" Pinkie huffed on the little glass window and then rubbed it with the sleeve of her musquash coat and peered out. "No, I don't think so." She champed on a piece of plum cake like an eager puppy. "I tell you what I do see, though. There's somebody in the garden wandering around."

"Not the Angel Gabriel, is it?" Spud said. "We don't want him here. Not yet, anyway."

This was the signal for another jovial duet of laughter, and then Pinkie opened the door of the shelter and called, "Hullo there. Who is it? Who's about?"

An answering voice called, "Hullo there!" and Pinkie said, "Oh, it's you, Mr. Ackerly. We're in here. In the shelter."

"What's come over him?" Spud said. "He doesn't usually call till Christmas Day. Everybody's changing their habits."

"Come in, Mr. Ackerly, if you can get in," Pinkie said. "Come and join us."

"Yes," Spud said, "come and join óur happy throng."

Mr. Ackerly, a tall, stooping figure looking rather like a pessimistic giraffe with a bowler hat on, appeared from the outer gloom, carrying a bottle wrapped in tissue paper.

"What a nice surprise," Spud said. "What brings you on Christmas Eve? You usually come tomorrow."

"Oh, I don't know." Pessimism oozed out of Mr. Ackerly like dark vapour; there was almost a cloud about the candle. "After all, there might not *be* a tomorrow."

"Now don't start talking about The Bomb again," Spud said. "It's Christmas Eve."

"No, no, not The Bomb, please," Pinkie said. "Have a drop of port. I'll go and get another glass for you."

"Oh, I don't know if I should—"

"Oh, of course you should!" Spud said. "Sit down. I don't like you standing up. You're so tall, I feel you'll lift our dear old shelter off its feet."

While Pinkie raced puppy-like across the garden to get another glass from the house, Mr. Ackerly sat down and stared about him with increasing gloom. Our dear old shelter—did you ever hear anything like it? Heavens it was awful. Whatever made them do it every year? Dear old shelter—there was a terrible monkish sort of odour about the place that repelled him. The mould of death lay on it—it really made him shudder.

Candlelight always depressed him too, anyway. What with that and The Bomb it seemed a pretty desolate outlook, he thought, as he sat there staring at Spud, the trembling candle, and all the silly, derelict paraphernalia of wartime. He couldn't for the life of him fathom what made them do it. The future was bleak enough without dragging up the past.

Cheerfully, actually humming a few bars of *Christians, Awake* Pinkie came back from the house with a glass for Mr. Ackerly.

"Just a modicum," Mr. Ackerly said. "That's ample—"

The sight of Pinkie pouring the port reminded Mr. Ackerly that he was the bearer of a gift. With a struggling sigh he handed over the bottle to Spud as if it were The Bomb itself.

"Just my usual little offering to both of you." He seemed to be about to render the first notes of a sepulchral anthem. "You'd better drink it up quick. If you ask me, we haven't much time."

Pinkie shut the door of the shelter and Spud ripped off the tissue wrapping of the bottle as if it concealed a new hat.

"Oh, our favourite whisky. Nice man. Thank you so awfully much," Spud said. "Kiss."

Mr. Ackerly, with despondent reluctance, suffered himself to be kissed first on one cheek by Spud and then on the other by Pinkie.

"How nice. How generous of you. Well, cheers," Spud said. "Here's to Christmas. And the best of luck in the future."

"Great Heavens, we'll need it," Mr. Ackerly said. "No, we won't though, because there isn't going to be any."

"Any what?" Spud said. "Future? Don't talk out of your back collar stud, man."

"Everybody was saying that in 1940," Pinkie said. "And dear knows they were the dark days—"

"Ah," Mr. Ackerly said, "but this is different. This is different."

Spud laughed again, French-horn fashion, and held out her glass.

"I'll have a drop more, Pinkie dear, please. I need fortifying."

"We all do," Mr. Ackerly said. "That's why I say, 'Drink up your bottle while you can.' There isn't much time. There can't be."

"I vote we do that," Spud said. "What say, Pinkie? I feel in that mood."

"You know me," Pinkie said. "I'm game for anything. Especially the you know what. It's Christmas anyway."

Again the duet of careless laughter, to Mr. Ackerly's increasing despondency, echoed merrily about the shelter. Where, he thought, was there any possible cause for laughter? The terrible dark claw of everlasting oblivion was hanging over all of them and the best these two could do was howl with laughter. You might have thought it was just some silly bun-fight.

"Shall we start the whisky?" Spud said. "Let's."

She drained her third glass of port, at the same time urging Mr. Ackerly to drink up, and held out her empty glass to Pinkie who immediately started to tot out whisky.

"Oh, by the way," Pinkie said, "don't let me forget when you go. We've got the most marvellous pumpkin chutney for you."

Pumpkin chutney!—Ye gods, it was as if in the middle of a terrible and obliterating earthquake you sat trying to thread a needle. It was like sitting under the fiery lava of Vesuvius trying to set a mousetrap.

When he had partly recovered from the ghastly incongruity of the whole thing, he started to get up and say, "If you don't mind, I think I ought to be getting along."

"Oh, no you don't," Spud said. "You're going to have some whisky. After all it was your idea."

"Of course," Pinkie said. "Don't be inconsistent."

"No, but really I ought to go. It's getting dark and I've quite a lot—"

"Dark?" Spud said. "Good Heavens, man, you're not frightened, are you?"

"No, no," Mr. Ackerly said. "I'm not frightened of *anything*."

"Do have some whisky," Pinkie said. She sat sipping at her glass, all rosy fire in the candlelight, occasionally smacking her lips exactly like a panting little dog. "It's delicious."

"Do you mind if I don't mix it?" Mr. Ackerly said. "It really isn't good for me."

"Have a piece of plum cake and some cheese," Spud said. "They go awfully well together."

With rising nausea Mr. Ackerly rejected the idea of cake and cheese and then slowly sat down again, painfully resigned.

"We got quite tight once," Pinkie said, "didn't we, Spud dear?"

"Gloriously."

Appropriately glorious peals of laughter greeted this new memory, filling Mr. Ackerly with fresh amazement.

" And when we woke," Spud said, " the Ritz cinema had gone. Half of Cromwell Street and Johnson's factory had gone. And the Baptist Chapel and half the railway works. And we never knew a thing. The stars must have been watching over us that night."

Mr. Ackerly could think of no coherent or sensible answer to this reminiscence, which was offered as if it were a scene from some reckless pantomime. Again the shelter rang with laughter.

" Do I hear the band? " Pinkie said. " I think I do."

A hush fell on the shelter. Pinkie opened the door and leaned out, poised and alert as a setter, listening.

" All the stars are shining," she said, " and yes, it's the band."

" Leave the door open," Spud said, " I like to hear it."

It was chilly with the door open. A sharp draught swept about Mr. Ackerly's feet and legs. He was going to catch his death of cold; he knew he would.

" They were playing *O Come, All Ye Faithful,*" Pinkie said. "They've stopped now."

" Means they're on their way here, I suppose," Spud said. "I think you ought to go and get the Christmas box ready now, Pinkie dear."

" I think so too. How much? Five shillings? "

" Oh, ten. After all it's only Christmas once a year."

Pinkie fled across the darkened garden, leaving Spud sipping with cushiony content at her whisky and Mr. Ackerly bowed under deeper vapours of gloom. There would, he told himself, be no more Christmases. Let there be no illusion about that. This, he thought, was the last there would ever be.

He was about to express these profoundly despondent thoughts to Spud when, outside in the street, the band struck up, brassily playing *It Came Upon the Midnight Clear.* Spud drank and listened. She wouldn't be hearing that tune many more times, Mr. Ackerly assured her miserably, but Spud didn't seem to listen and didn't seem to care. Under the influence of port and whisky she had suddenly begun to feel merriment drive out contentment and now and then she gave a fruity chuckle.

" How you can sit there chuckling in what is probably the most solemn and awful crisis in all history, I cannot think," Mr. Ackerly said. " It's dreadful—it's wicked—it's tempting Providence."

" I was thinking of one of the men who plays the euphonium in the band," Spud said. " Fred Saunders. He's so small. He

isn't much bigger than the euphonium. He taught Pinkie to blow last year. Just one note mind you."

"I can't say that I know him."

"I love him," Spud said, taking a big plum out of a piece of cake and gazing at it lovingly. "He's great fun."

Suddenly she gave up gazing at the plum and popped it in her mouth and then, thinking that she saw Pinkie moving in the light of the house, wobbled to the doorway of the shelter and called, "Is that you, Pinkie dear? Who's collecting tonight? Fred?"

Pinkie's merrily twittering voice called back that she didn't know and they'd only played one carol yet and she thought that really, for ten bob, they ought to have two.

"Well, find Fred anyway and bring him over for a tot."

While waiting for Pinkie to come back, Spud insisted on Mr. Ackerly having another drop of port. This time he was too depressed to refuse and anyway he simply had to do something to keep out that dreadful cold. What a ghastly situation it was to be sitting here under the Shadow of the Bomb and perhaps, all the time, simply catching your death of cold in the ordinary way. It hardly bore thinking about. You hadn't a ghost of a chance whichever way you looked at it.

Meanwhile the band played *Silent Night, Holy Night* and the melancholy beauty of the tune suddenly drove Mr. Ackerly to the verge of tears. He had the greatest difficulty in stifling a sob and in order to do so drank half a glass of port very quickly, gulping loudly.

Spud took the opportunity to top up his glass and a moment later Pinkie was back, bringing Fred Saunders, who in turn had brought his euphonium. Fred was dressed in a maroon-coloured bandsman's uniform with gold frogs and epaulettes and a matching peaked cap with the words *Temperance Silver Band* ringed across it.

"So very nice to see you, Fred. Happy Christmas! Port or whisky?"

"Well, I've been on whisky," Fred said, "except for a couple of beers before we started."

"Whisky it had better be," Spud said. "Come into the office anyway."

Fred, who propped up his euphonium by the door, had a way of laughing that was discordant but not unpleasant, rather like one of those tunes played on an old cracked piano. His voice suddenly inspired both Pinkie and Spud to fresh merriment and they blessed him with "Cheers and a happy Christmas and many of them."

"Mr. Ackerly here thinks this'll be the last one we'll ever have," Spud said.

"Gorblimey, why?"

"The Bomb."

"Oh, to 'ell with The Bomb," Fred said. "Stone the crows."

"You hear what Fred says?" Spud asked Mr. Ackerly. "To hell with The Bomb and stone the crows."

"Stoning the crows isn't the sort of expedient I should recommend in this crisis," Mr. Ackerly said. "Don't you *see*? We're *doomed*!"

"No?" Fred said. "Well, you're only dead once."

"That's true," Pinkie said, laughing lightly. She was beginning to feel a higher sense of merriment too. Again she laughed, this time with little shrieks, and suddenly said she wondered if Fred was going to give them a little tune on the euphonium. Like he did last year.

"Do, Fred, please."

"I might if I get another wet," Fred said, and let off a few of his own cracked scales of laughter.

"That's right, let's all have another wet," Spud said. "Mr. Ackerly, what about another drop of Strontium 90?"

Spud, Pinkie, and Fred roared with laughter, but the mention of Strontium 90 under conditions that would have been farcical if they had not been tragic, seemed to Mr. Ackerly a terrible and shocking heresy. He could neither speak nor drink. The port filled him with revulsion and suddenly he felt the draught from the door climb up his spine like a chilling, long-legged spider.

Fred, who hadn't much idea what Strontium 90 was, watched his glass being filled by Pinkie with eager relish. He quickly knocked back his whisky, gave another cracked laugh, and then asked what would it be? The tune, he meant.

"*Nearer my God to Thee*, Mr. Ackerly?"

"Oh, *please*. Don't joke. Please."

"Play what you played for us last year," Pinkie said. "You said it was your favourite one."

"But that ain't a carol," Fred said.

"I know it isn't. But I like it all the same. It puts you in such good humour."

"*Little Brown Jug*, wasn't it?" Spud said. "Yes, I remember now."

To play *Little Brown Jug* while the Shadow of The Bomb was hanging over them seemed to Mr. Ackerly an even more shocking heresy than talking of drinking Strontium 90 in an old air raid shelter, but as the ghastly noise of the euphonium rang through the shelter he was equally shocked to see both Spud and Pinkie

singing loudly and then soon, hand in hand, dancing round.

" My wife and I lived all alone
In a little log hut we called our own.
She loved gin and I loved rum—
I tell you what, we'd lots of fun.
Ha, ha, ha! you and me,
Little brown jug, don't I love thee!"

they sang; and then suddenly Spud shouted, " Happy Christmas to everybody! Let 'em all come! To hell with The Bomb!"

" To blazes with it!" Pinkie said. " And stone the crows."

" Are we down'earted?" Fred suddenly asked, and got from the ladies an almost thunderous answer, " No!"

Only Mr. Ackerly was downhearted. The strident noises of the euphonium and the singing were altogether too much for him and he now sought refuge in the garden, shivering.

" What about me blowing a note now, Fred?" Pinkie said. " Like last year."

" That's a good idea," Fred said. " Blow the old raspberry."

" Splendid," Spud said. " Splendid. Let's all go outside."

In the garden Pinkie embraced the euphonium with fond anticipation, pointing the horn to the sky. She had almost forgotten which valves to press, but Fred soon put her right on this and then urged her, " Go on. Now give 'er all you got, miss. Ready? One, two three!"

Pinkie blew hard, instantly producing what Fred called " a bit of a rag-tearer," a rude single blast that rose on the night air with something like defiance, mocking the darkness.

" Splendid!" Spud said. " Old Gabriel couldn't have done better. What price our new bandsman, Mr. Ackerly?"

" Mr. Ackerly's gone," Fred said. " You blowed 'im to Kingdom come."

" Oh dear, the poor man's forgotten his pumpkin chutney," Pinkie said.

Mr. Ackerly's sudden silent departure was a signal for not only another merry trio of laughter but in due course another whisky for Fred. As he prepared to drink it he wished the ladies, " A very happy Christmas and many of 'em," and they wished him the same in return. They also kissed him on both cheeks, Pinkie so enthusiastically that his bandsman's cap was knocked askew, with the result that the words *Temperance Silver Band* were very much to one side.

" Well, no use, I must be going," Fred said. " Never catch 'em up—"

"Good-bye, Fred. Lovely seeing you. Happy, happy Christmas."

"Good-bye, Fred," Pinkie said. "And what do we say?"

"Let 'em all come!" Fred said. "That's what we say!"

Like a silver ghost the euphonium passed across the garden. When it had disappeared into darkness Pinkie and Spud stood for some time framed in the doorway of the shelter, silent in the candlelight, looking up at the sky.

The laughter was over now.

"Shall we thank our lucky stars, Pinkie dear? We always do."

In silence they held up their glasses to the stars.

"They always look so awfully eternal somehow, don't they, Spud dear?"

By this time the band was playing again, now farther away, and the sound of bells was bright across the town.

"That's the way they always look to me," Spud said. "But then I like to think we're a bit of the old eternal too."

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VENETIAN CHRISTMAS

A Venetian Christmas is a staunchly family festival . . . there is a great deal of hand-shaking in the streets, and many a delighted reunion at the steamboat station. Suddenly everyone in Venice seems to know everyone else. . . The windows burgeon with Christmas trees. Every passing barge seems full of bottles, or parcels, or little firs from the mountains, and every child in Venice seems to trail a red balloon.

In the plushy cafes of St. Mark's (Regency stripes and spindly chairs) spruce infants listen with deference to the interminable reminiscences of immaculate uncles: and in the cafes on Christmas Eve 20,000 families giggle before the television sets, drinking Cinzano and eating sticky cakes, while the favourite melody of the day is passed from shop to shop, from square to square; down one dark alley to another, like a cheerful watchword in the night.

The Christmas services are warm, bright and glistening; the cribs are crude but touching; the choirs sing lustily; and Venice feels less like a grand duchess than a buxom land-lady, enjoying a glass of stout when the customers have gone (except for the mysterious permutations of clergy, gold and crimson and misty with incense, that you might glimpse passing and repassing the open doors of the Basilica.)

JAMES MORRIS, *Venice*

ESCAPE

PRESS REPORTS:

Pretoria,

December 13, 1899.—**Though Mr. Churchill's escape was cleverly executed there is little chance of his being able to cross the border.**

London,

December 16.—**With reference to the escape from Pretoria of Mr. Winston Churchill, fears are expressed that he may be captured again before long and if so may probably be shot.**

£25

(Twenty-five Pounds stg.) REWARD is offered by the Sub-Commission of the fifth division, on behalf of the Special Constable of the said division, to anyone who brings the escaped prisoner of war

CHURCHILL,

dead or alive to this office.

For the Sub-Commission of the fifth division,

(Signed) LODK. de HAAS, Sec.

BY

WINSTON S. CHURCHILL

DURING the first three weeks of my captivity, although I was a party to all plans of revolt or escape, I was engaged in arguing with the Boer Authorities that they should release me as a Press Correspondent. They replied that I had forfeited my non-combatant status by the part I had taken in the armoured train fight. I contended that I had not fired a shot and had been taken unarmed. This was strictly true. But the Natal newspapers had been captured by the Boers. These contained glowing accounts of my activities, and attributed the escape of the engine and the wounded entirely to me. General Joubert therefore intimated that even if I had not fired a shot myself, I had injured the Boer operations by freeing the engine, and that I must therefore be treated as a prisoner of war. As soon as I learnt of this decision, in the first week of December, I resolved to escape.

I shall transcribe what I wrote at the time where I cannot improve upon it.

"The State Model Schools stood in the midst of a quadrangle, and were surrounded on two sides by an iron grille and on two by a corrugated-iron fence about ten feet high. These boundaries offered little obstacle to anyone who possessed the activity of youth, but the fact that they were guarded on the inside by sentries, fifty yards apart, armed with rifle and revolver, made them a well-nigh insuperable barrier. No walls are so hard to pierce as living walls.

"After anxious reflection and continual watching, it was discovered by several of the prisoners that when the sentries along the eastern side walked about on their beats, they were at certain moments unable to see the top of a few yards of the wall near the small circular lavatory office. The electric lights in the middle of the quadrangle brilliantly lighted the whole place, but the eastern wall was in shadow. The first thing was therefore to pass the two sentries near the office. It was necessary to hit off the exact moment when both their backs should be turned together. After the wall was scaled we should be in the garden of the villa next door. There the plan came to an end. Everything after this was vague and uncertain. How to get out of the garden, how to pass unnoticed through the streets, how to evade the patrols that

surrounded the town, and above all how to cover the two hundred and eighty miles to the Portuguese frontier, were questions which would arise at a later stage.

"Together with Captain Haldane and Lieutenant Brockie I made an abortive attempt, not pushed with any decision, on December 11. There was no difficulty in getting into the circular office. But to climb out of it over the wall was a hazard of the sharpest character. Anyone doing so must at the moment he was on top of the wall be plainly visible to the sentries fifteen yards away, if they were in the right place and happened to look! Whether the sentries would challenge or fire depended entirely upon their individual dispositions, and no one could tell what they would do. Nevertheless I was determined that nothing should stop my taking the plunge the next day. As the 12th wore away my fears crystallised more and more into desperation. In the evening, after my two friends had made an attempt, but had not found the moment propitious, I strolled across the quadrangle and secreted myself in the circular office. Through an aperture in the metal casing of which it was built I watched the sentries. For some time they remained stolid and obstructive. Then all of a sudden one turned and walked up to his comrade, and they began to talk. Their backs were turned.

"Now or never! I stood on a ledge, seized the top of the wall with my hands, and drew myself up. Twice I let myself down again in sickly hesitation, and then with a third resolve scrambled up and over. My waistcoat got entangled with the ornamental metal-work on the top. I had to pause for an appreciable moment to extricate myself. In this posture I had one parting glimpse of the sentries still talking with their backs turned fifteen yards away. One of them was lighting his cigarette, and I remember the glow on the inside of his hands as a distinct impression which my mind recorded. Then I lowered myself lightly down into the adjoining garden and crouched among the shrubs. I was free! The first step had been taken, and it was irrevocable. It now remained to await the arrival of my comrades. The bushes in the garden gave a good deal of cover, and in the moonlight their shadows fell dark on the ground. I lay here for an hour in great impatience and anxiety. People were continually moving about in the garden, and once a man came and apparently looked straight at me only a few yards away. Where were the others? Why did they not make the attempt?

"Suddenly I heard a voice from within the quadrangle say, quite loud, 'All up.' I crawled back to the wall. Two officers were walking up and down inside, jabbering Latin words, laughing and talking all manner of nonsense—amid which I caught my name. I risked a cough. One of the officers immediately began to chatter alone. The other said, slowly and clearly, 'They cannot get out. The sentry suspects. It's all up. Can you get back again?' But now all my fears fell from me at once. To go back was impossible. I could not hope to climb the wall unnoticed. There was no

helpful ledge on the outside. Fate pointed onwards. Besides, I said to myself, 'Of course, I shall be recaptured, but I will at least have a run for my money.' I said to the officers, 'I shall go on alone.'

"Now I was in the right mood for these undertakings—failure being almost certain, no odds against success affected me . . . The gate which led into the road was only a few yards from another sentry. I said to myself, 'Toujours de l'audace,' put my hat on my head, strode into the middle of the garden, walked past the windows of the house without any attempt at concealment, and so went through the gate and turned to the left. I passed the sentry at less than five yards. Most of them knew me by sight. Whether he looked at me or not I do not know, for I never turned my head. I restrained with the utmost difficulty an impulse to run. But after walking a hundred yards and hearing no challenge, I knew that the second obstacle had been surmounted. I was at large in Pretoria.

"I walked on leisurely through the night, humming a tune and choosing the middle of the road. The streets were full of burghers, but they paid no attention to me. Gradually I reached the suburbs, and on a little bridge I sat down to reflect and consider. I was in the heart of the enemy's country. I knew no one to whom I could apply for succour. Nearly three hundred miles stretched between me and Delagoa Bay. My escape must be known at dawn. Pursuit would be immediate. Yet all exits were barred. The town was picketed, the country was patrolled, the trains were searched, the line was guarded. I wore a civilian brown flannel suit. I had seventy-five pounds in my pocket and four slabs of chocolate, but the compass and the map which might have guided me, the opium tablets and meat lozenges which should have sustained me, were in my friends' pockets in the State Model Schools. Worst of all, I could not speak a word of Dutch or Kaffir, and how was I to get food or direction?

"But when hope had departed, fear had gone as well. I formed a plan. I would find the Delagoa Bay Railway. Without map or compass, I must follow that in spite of the pickets. I looked at the stars. Orion shone brightly. Scarcely a year before he had guided me when lost in the desert to the banks of the Nile. He had given me water. Now he should lead to freedom. I could not endure the want of either.

"After walking south for half a mile I struck the railway. Was it the line to Delagoa Bay or the Pietersburg branch? If it were the former, it should run east. But, so far as I could see, this line ran northwards. Still, it might be only winding its way out among the hills. I resolved to follow it. The night was delicious. A cool breeze fanned my face, and a wild feeling of exhilaration took hold of me. At any rate, I was free, if only for an hour. That was something. The fascination of the adventure grew. Unless the stars in their courses fought for me, I could not escape. Where, then, was the need of caution? I marched briskly along the

line. Here and there the lights of a picket fire gleamed. Every bridge had its watchers. But I passed them all, making very short detours at the dangerous places, and really taking scarcely any precautions. Perhaps that was the reason I succeeded.

"As I walked I extended my plan. I could not march three hundred miles to the frontier. I would board a train in motion and hide under the seats, on the roof, on the couplings—anywhere. I thought of Paul Bultitude's escape from school in *Vice Versa*. I saw myself emerging from under the seat, and bribing or persuading some fat first-class passenger to help me. What train should I take? The first, of course. After walking for two hours, I perceived the signal lights of a station. I left the line, and circling round it, hid in the ditch by the track about two hundred yards beyond the platform. I argued that the train would stop at the station and that it would not have got up too much speed by the time it reached me. An hour passed. I began to grow impatient. Suddenly I heard the whistle and the approaching rattle. Then the great yellow headlights of the engine flashed into view. The train waited five minutes at the station, and started again with much noise and steaming. I crouched by the track. I rehearsed the act in my mind. I must wait until the engine had passed, otherwise I should be seen. Then I must make a dash for the carriages.

"The train started slowly, but gathered speed sooner than I had expected. The flaring lights drew swiftly near. The rattle became a roar. The dark mass hung for a second above me. The engine-driver silhouetted against his furnace glow, the black profile of the engine, the clouds of steam rushed past. Then I hurled myself on the trucks, clutched at something, missed, clutched again, missed again, grasped some sort of hand-hold, was swung off my feet—my toes bumping on the line, and with a struggle seated myself on the couplings of the fifth truck from the front of the train. It was a goods train, and the trucks were full of sacks, soft sacks covered with coal-dust. They were in fact bags filled with empty coal bags going back to their colliery. I crawled on top and burrowed in among them. In five minutes I was completely buried. The sacks were warm and comfortable. Perhaps the engine-driver had seen me rush up to the train and would give the alarm at the next station; on the other hand, perhaps not. Where was the train going to? Where would it be unloaded? Would it be searched? Was it on the Delagoa Bay line? What should I do in the morning? Ah, never mind that. Sufficient for the night was the luck thereof. Fresh plans for fresh contingencies. I resolved to sleep, nor can I imagine a more pleasing lullaby than the clatter of the train that carries an escaping prisoner at twenty miles an hour away from the enemy's capital.

"How long I slept I do not know, but I woke up suddenly with all feelings of exhilaration gone, and only the consciousness of oppressive difficulties heavy on me. I must leave the train before daybreak, so that I could drink at a pool and find some hiding-place while it was still dark. I would not run the risk of being unloaded

with the coal bags. Another night I would board another train. I crawled from my cosy hiding-place among the sacks and sat again on the couplings. The train was running at a fair speed, but I felt it was time to leave it. I took hold of the iron handle at the back of the truck, pulled strongly with my left hand, and sprang. My feet struck the ground in two gigantic strides, and the next instant I was sprawling in the ditch considerably shaken but unhurt. The train, my faithful ally of the night, hurried on its journey.

" It was still dark. I was in the middle of a wide valley, surrounded by low hills, and carpeted with high grass drenched in dew. I searched for water in the nearest gully, and soon found a clear pool. I was very thirsty, but long after I had quenched my thirst I continued to drink, that I might have sufficient for the whole day.

" Presently the dawn began to break, and the sky to the east grew yellow and red, slashed across with heavy black clouds. I saw with relief that the railway ran steadily towards the sunrise. I had taken the right line, after all.

" Having drunk my fill, I set out for the hills, among which I hoped to find some hiding-place, and as it became broad daylight I entered a small grove of trees which grew on the side of a deep ravine. Here I resolved to wait till dusk. I had one consolation: no one in the world knew where I was—I did not know myself. It was now four o'clock. Fourteen hours lay between me and the night. My impatience to proceed while I was still strong doubled their length. At first it was terribly cold, but by degrees the sun gained power, and by ten o'clock the heat was oppressive. My sole companion was a gigantic vulture, who manifested an extravagant interest in my condition, and made hideous and ominous gurglings from time to time. From my lofty position I commanded a view of the whole valley. A little tin-roofed town lay three miles to the westward. Scattered farmsteads, each with a clump of trees, relieved the monotony of the undulating ground. At the foot of the hill stood a Kaffir kraal, and the figures of its inhabitants dotted the patches of cultivation or surrounded the droves of goats and cows which fed on the pasture . . . During the day I ate one slab of chocolate, which, with the heat, produced a violent thirst. The pool was hardly half a mile away, but I dared not leave the shelter of the little wood, for I could see the figures of white men riding or walking occasionally across the valley, and once a Boer came and fired two shots at birds close to my hiding-place. But no one discovered me.

" The elation and the excitement of the previous night had burnt away, and a chilling reaction followed. I was very hungry, for I had had no dinner before starting, and chocolate, though it sustains, does not satisfy. I had scarcely slept, but yet my heart beat so fiercely and I was so nervous and perplexed about the future that I could not rest. I thought of all the chances that lay against me; I dreaded and detested more than words can express

the prospect of being caught and dragged back to Pretoria. I found no comfort in any of the philosophical ideas which some men parade in their hours of ease and strength and safety. They seemed only fair-weather friends. I realised with awful force that no exercise of my own feeble wit and strength could save me from my enemies, and that without the assistance of that High Power which interferes in the eternal sequence of causes and effects more often than we are always prone to admit, I could never succeed. I prayed long and earnestly for help and guidance. My prayer, as it seems to me, was swiftly and wonderfully answered."

I wrote these lines many years ago while the impression of the adventure was strong upon me. Then I could tell no more . . . The time has come when I can relate the events which followed . . .

During the day I had watched the railway with attention. I saw two or three trains pass along it each way. I argued that the same number would pass at night. I resolved to board one of these . . . I saw myself leaving the train again before dawn, having been carried forward another sixty or seventy miles during the night. That would be scarcely one hundred and fifty miles from the frontier. And why should not the process be repeated? Where was the flaw? I could not see it. With three long bounds on three successive nights I could be in Portuguese territory. Meanwhile I still had two or three slabs of chocolate and a pocketful of crumbled biscuit—enough, that is to say, to keep body and soul together at a pinch without running the awful risk of recapture entailed by accosting a single human being. In this mood I watched with increasing impatience the arrival of darkness.

The long day reached its close at last. The western clouds flushed into fire; the shadows of the hills stretched out across the valley; a ponderous Boer wagon with its long team crawled slowly along the track towards the township, the Kaffirs collected their herds and drew them round their kraal; the daylight died, and soon it was quite dark. Then, and not until then, I set forth. I hurried to the railway line, scrambling along through the boulders and high grass and pausing on my way to drink at a stream of sweet cold water. I made my way to the place where I had seen the trains crawling so slowly up the slope, and soon found a point where the curve of the track fulfilled all the conditions of my plan. Here, behind a little bush, I sat down and waited hopefully. An hour passed; two hours passed; three hours—and yet no train!

Six hours had now elapsed since the last, whose time I had carefully noted, had gone by. Surely one was due.

Another hour slipped away. Still no train! My plan began to crumble and my hopes to ooze out of me . . . Between twelve and one in the morning I lost patience and started along the track, resolved to cover at any rate ten or fifteen miles of my journey. I did not make much progress. Every bridge was guarded by armed men; every few miles were huts. At intervals

there were stations with tin-roofed villages clustering around them. All the veldt was bathed in the bright rays of the full moon, and to avoid these dangerous places I had to make wide circuits and even to creep along the ground. Leaving the railroad I fell into bogs and swamps, brushed through high grass dripping with dew, and waded across the streams over which the bridges carried the railway. I was soon drenched to the waist. I had been able to take very little exercise during my month's imprisonment, and I was quickly tired with walking and with want of food and sleep. Presently I approached a station. It was a mere platform in the veldt, with two or three buildings and huts around it. But laid up on the sidings, obviously for the night, were three long goods trains. Evidently the flow of traffic over the railway was uneven. These three trains, motionless in the moonlight, confirmed my fears that traffic was not maintained by night on this part of the line. Where, then, was my plan which in the afternoon had looked so fine and sure?

It now occurred to me that I might board one of these stationary trains immediately, and hiding amid its freight be carried forward during the next day—and night too if all were well . . . I crept up to the platform and got between two of the long trains on the siding. I was proceeding to examine the markings on the trucks when loud voices rapidly approaching on the outside of the trains filled me with fear. Several Kaffirs were laughing and shouting in their unmodulated tones, and I heard, as I thought, a European voice arguing or ordering.

At any rate, it was enough for me. I retreated between the two trains to the extreme end of the siding, and slipped stealthily but rapidly into the grass of the illimitable plain.

There was nothing for it but to plod on—but in an increasingly purposeless and hopeless manner . . . Out in the darkness to my left gleamed two or three fires. I was sure they were not the lights of houses, but how far off they were or what they were I could not be certain. The idea formed in my mind that they were the fires of a Kaffir kraal. Then I began to think that the best use I could make of my remaining strength would be to go to these Kaffirs. I had heard that they hated the Boers and were friendly to the British . . . They might even be induced to help me. A guide, a pony—but, above all, rest, warmth, and food—such were the promptings which dominated my mind. So I set out towards the fires.

I must have walked a mile or so in this resolve before a realisation of its weakness and imprudence took possession of me. Then I turned back again to the railway line and retraced my steps perhaps half the distance. Then I stopped and sat down, completely baffled, destitute of any idea what to do or where to turn. Suddenly without the slightest reason all my doubts disappeared. It was certainly by no process of logic that they were dispelled. I just felt quite clear that I would go to the Kaffir kraal. I had sometimes in former years held a " Planchette " pencil and written while

others had touched my wrist or hand. I acted in exactly the same unconscious or subconscious manner now.

I walked on rapidly towards the fires, which I had in the first instance thought were not more than a couple of miles from the railway line. I soon found they were much farther away than that. After about an hour or an hour and a half they still seemed almost as far off as ever. But I persevered, and presently between two and three o'clock in the morning I perceived that they were not the fires of a Kaffir kraal. The angular outline of buildings began to draw out against them, and soon I saw that I was approaching a group of houses around the mouth of a coalmine. The wheel which worked the winding gear was plainly visible, and I could see that the fires which had led me so far were from the furnaces of the engines. Hard by, surrounded by one or two slighter structures, stood a small but substantial stone house two storeys high.

. . . I had heard it said before I escaped that in the mining district of Witbank and Middelburg there were a certain number of English residents who had been suffered to remain in the country in order to keep the mines working. Had I been led to one of these? What did this house which frowned dark and inscrutable upon me contain? A Briton or a Boer; a friend or a foe? Nor did this exhaust the possibilities. I had my seventy-five pounds in English notes in my pocket. If I revealed my identity, I thought that I could give reasonable assurance of a thousand. I might find some indifferent neutral-minded person who out of good nature or for a large sum of money would aid me in my bitter and desperate need. Certainly I would try to make what bargain I could now—now while I still had the strength to plead my cause and perhaps to extricate myself if the results were adverse. Still the odds were heavy against me, and it was with faltering and reluctant steps that I walked out of the shimmering gloom of the veldt into the light of the furnace fires, advanced towards the silent house, and struck with my fist upon the door.

There was a pause. Then I knocked again. And almost immediately a light sprang up above and an upper window opened.

"Wer ist da?" cried a man's voice.

I felt the shock of disappointment and consternation to my fingers.

"I want help; I have had an accident," I replied.

Some muttering followed. Then I heard steps descending the stairs, the bolt of the door was drawn, the lock was turned. It was opened abruptly, and in the darkness of the passage a tall man hastily attired, with a pale face and dark moustache, stood before me.

"What do you want?" he said, this time in English.

I had now to think of something to say. I wanted above all to get into parley with this man, to get matters in such a state that instead of raising an alarm and summoning others he would discuss things quietly.

"I am a burgher," I began. "I have had an accident. I was going to join my commando at Komati Poort. I have fallen off the

train. We were skylarking. I have been unconscious for hours. I think I have dislocated my shoulder."

It is astonishing how one thinks of these things. This story leapt out as if I had learnt it by heart. Yet I had not the slightest idea what I was going to say or what the next sentence would be.

The stranger regarded me intently, and after some hesitation said at length, "Well, come in." He retreated a little into the darkness of the passage, threw open a door on one side of it and pointed with his left hand into a dark room. I walked past him and entered, wondering if it was to be my prison. He followed, struck a light, lit a lamp, and set it on the table at the far side of which I stood. I was in a small room, evidently a dining-room and office in one. I noticed besides the large table, a roll desk, two or three chairs, and one of those machines for making soda-water, consisting of two glass globes set one above the other and encased in thin wire-netting. On his end of the table my host had laid a revolver, which he had hitherto presumably been holding in his right hand.

"I think I'd like to know a little more about this railway accident of yours," he said, after a considerable pause.

"I think," I replied, "I had better tell you the truth."

"I think you had," he said, slowly.

So I took the plunge and threw all I had upon the board.

"I am Winston Churchill, War Correspondent of the *Morning Post*. I escaped last night from Pretoria. I am making my way to the frontier." (Making my way!) "I have plenty of money. Will you help me?"

There was another long pause. My companion rose from the table slowly and locked the door. After this act, which struck me as unpromising, and was certainly ambiguous, he advanced upon me and suddenly held out his hand.

"Thank God you have come here! It is the only house for twenty miles where you would not have been handed over. But we are all British here, and we will see you through."

It is easier to recall across the gulf of years the spasm of relief which swept over me, than it is to describe it. A moment before I had thought myself trapped; and now friends, food, resources, aid, were all at my disposal. I felt like a drowning man pulled out of the water and informed he has won the Derby!

My host now introduced himself as Mr. John Howard, manager of the Transvaal Collieries. He had become a naturalised burgher of the Transvaal some years before the war. But out of consideration for his British race and some inducements which he had offered to the local Field Cornet, he had not been called up to fight against the British. Instead he had been allowed to remain with one or two others on the mine, keeping it pumped out and in good order until coal-cutting could be resumed. He had with him at the mine-head, besides his secretary, who was British, an engine-man from Lancashire and two Scottish miners. All these four were British subjects and had been allowed to remain only upon giving their

parole to observe strict neutrality. He himself as burgher of the Transvaal Republic would be guilty of treason in harbouring me, and liable to be shot if caught at the time or found out later on.

"Never mind," he said, "we will fix it up somehow." And added, "The Field Cornet was round here this afternoon asking about you. They have got the hue and cry out all along the line and all over the district."

I said that I did not wish to compromise him.

Let him give me food, a pistol, a guide, and if possible a pony, and I would make my own way to the sea, marching by night across country far away from the railway line or any habitation.

He would not hear of it. He would fix up something. But he enjoined the utmost caution. Spies were everywhere. He had two Dutch servant-maids actually sleeping in the house. There were many Kaffirs employed about the mine premises and on the pumping-machinery of the mine. Surveying these dangers, he became very thoughtful.

Then: "But you are famishing."

I did not contradict him. In a moment he had bustled off into the kitchen, telling me meanwhile to help myself from a whisky bottle and the soda-water machine which I have already mentioned. He returned after an interval with the best part of a cold leg of mutton and various other delectable commodities, and, leaving me to do full justice to these, quitted the room and let himself out of the house by a back door.

Nearly an hour passed before Mr. Howard returned. In this period my physical wellbeing had been brought into harmony with the improvement in my prospects. I felt confident of success and equal to anything.

"It's all right," said Mr. Howard. "I have seen the men, and they are all for it. We must put you down the pit tonight, and there you will have to stay till we can see how to get you out of the country. One difficulty," he said, "will be the skoff (food). The Dutch girl sees every mouthful I eat. The cook will want to know what has happened to her leg of mutton. I shall have to think it all out during the night. You must get down the pit at once. We'll make you comfortable enough."

Accordingly, just as the dawn was breaking, I followed my host across a little yard into the enclosure in which stood the winding-wheel of the mine. Here a stout man, introduced as Mr. Dewsnap, of Oldham, locked my hand in a grip of crushing vigour.

"They'll all vote for you next time," he whispered.

A door was opened and I entered the cage. Down we shot into the bowels of the earth. At the bottom of the mine were the two Scottish miners with lanterns and a big bundle which afterwards proved to be a mattress and blankets. We walked for some time through the pitchy labyrinth, with frequent turns, twists, and alterations of level, and finally stopped in a sort of chamber where the air was cool and fresh. Here my guide set down his bundle,

and Mr. Howard handed me a couple of candles, a bottle of whisky, and a box of cigars.

"There's no difficulty about these," he said. "I keep them under lock and key. Now we must plan how to feed you tomorrow.

"Don't move from here, whatever happens," was the parting injunction. "There will be Kaffirs about the mine after daylight, but we shall be on the lookout that none of them wanders this way. None of them has seen anything so far."

My four friends trooped off with their lanterns, and I was left alone. Viewed from the velvety darkness of the pit, life seemed bathed in rosy light . . .

I DO NOT KNOW how many hours I slept, but the following afternoon must have been far advanced when I found myself thoroughly awake. I put out my hand for the candle, but could feel it nowhere. I did not know what pitfalls these mining-galleries might contain, so I thought it better to lie quiet on my mattress and await developments. Several hours passed before the faint gleam of a lantern showed that someone was coming. It proved to be Mr. Howard himself, armed with a chicken and other good things. He also brought several books. He asked me why I had not lighted my candle. I said I couldn't find it.

"Didn't you put it under the mattress?" he asked.

"No."

"Then the rats must have got it."

He told me there were swarms of rats in the mine, that some years ago he had introduced a particular kind of white rat, which was an excellent scavenger, and that these had multiplied and thriven exceedingly. He told me he had been to the house of an English doctor twenty miles away to get the chicken. He was worried at the attitude of the two Dutch servants, who were very inquisitive about the depredations upon the leg of mutton for which I had been responsible. If he could not get another chicken cooked for the next day, he would have to take double helpings on his own plate and slip the surplus into a parcel for me while the servant was out of the room. He said that inquiries were being made for me all over the district by the Boers, and that the Pretoria Government was making a tremendous fuss about my escape. The fact that there were a number of English remaining in the Middelburg mining region indicated it as a likely place for me to have turned to, and all persons of English origin were more or less suspect.

I again expressed my willingness to go on alone with a Kaffir guide and a pony, but this he utterly refused to entertain. It would take a lot of planning, he said, to get me out of the country, and I might have to stay in the mine for quite a long time.

"Here," he said, "you are absolutely safe. Mac" (by which he meant one of the Scottish miners) "knows all the disused workings and places that no one else would dream of. There is

one place here where the water actually touches the roof for a foot or two. If they searched the mine, Mac would dive under that with you into the workings cut off beyond the water. No one would ever think of looking there. We have frightened the Kaffirs with tales of ghosts, and anyhow, we are watching their movements continually."

He stayed with me while I dined, and then departed, leaving me, among other things, half a dozen candles which, duly warned, I tucked under my pillow and mattress.

I slept again for a long time, and woke suddenly with a feeling of movement about me. Something seemed to be pulling at my pillow. I put out my hand quickly. There was a perfect scurry. The rats were at the candles. I rescued the candles in time, and lighted one. Luckily for me, I have no horror of rats as such, and being reassured by their evident timidity, I was not particularly uneasy. All the same, the three days I passed in the mine were not among the most pleasant which my memory re-illumines. The patter of little feet and a perceptible sense of stir and scurry were continuous. Once I was waked up from a doze by one actually galloping across me. On the candle being lighted these beings became invisible.

The next day—if you can call it day—arrived in due course. This was December 14, and the third day since I had escaped from the State Model Schools. It was relieved by a visit from the two Scottish miners, with whom I had a long confabulation. I then learnt, to my surprise, that the mine was only about two hundred feet deep.

There were parts of it, said Mac, where one could see the daylight up a disused shaft. Would I like to take a turn around the old workings and have a glimmer? We passed an hour or two wandering round and up and down these subterranean galleries, and spent a quarter of an hour near the bottom of the shaft, where, grey and faint, the light of the sun and of the upper world was discerned. On this promenade I saw numbers of rats. They seemed rather nice little beasts, quite white, with dark eyes which I was assured in the daylight were a bright pink. Three years afterwards a British officer on duty in the district wrote to me that he had heard my statement at a lecture about white rats and their pink eyes, and thought it was the limit of mendacity. He had taken the trouble to visit the mine and see for himself, and he proceeded to apologise for having doubted my truthfulness.

On the 15th Mr. Howard announced that the hue and cry seemed to be dying away. No trace of the fugitive had been discovered throughout the mining district. The talk among the Boer officials was now that I must be hiding at the house of some British sympathiser in Pretoria. They did not believe that it was possible I could have got out of the town. In these circumstances he thought that I might come up and have a walk on the veldt that night, and that if all was quiet the next morning I might shift my quarters to the back room of the office. On the one hand he seemed reassured,

and on the other increasingly excited by the adventure. Accordingly, I had a fine stroll in the glorious fresh air and moonlight, and thereafter, anticipating slightly our programme, I took up my quarters behind packing-cases in the inner room of the office. Here I remained for three days, walking each night on the endless plain with Mr. Howard or his assistant.

On the 16th, the fifth day of escape, Mr. Howard informed me he had made a plan to get me out of the country. The mine was connected with the railway by a branch line. In the neighbourhood of the mine there lived a Dutchman, Burgener by name, who was sending a consignment of wool to Delagoa Bay on the 19th. This gentleman was well disposed to the British. He had been approached by Mr. Howard, had been made a party to our secret, and was willing to assist. Mr. Burgener's wool was packed in great bales and would fill two or three large trucks. These trucks were to be loaded at the mine's siding. The bales could be so packed as to leave a small place in the centre of the truck in which I could be concealed. A tarpaulin would be fastened over each truck after it had been loaded, and it was very unlikely indeed that, if the fastenings were found intact, it would be removed at the frontier. Did I agree to take this chance?

I was more worried about this than almost anything that had happened to me so far in my adventure. When by extraordinary chance one has gained some great advantage or prize and actually had it in one's possession and been enjoying it for several days, the idea of losing it becomes almost insupportable. I had really come to count upon freedom as a certainty, and the idea of having to put myself in a position in which I should be perfectly helpless, without a move of any kind, absolutely at the caprice of a searching party at the frontier, was profoundly harassing. Rather than face this ordeal I would much have preferred to start off on the veldt with a pony and a guide, and far from the haunts of man to make my way march by march beyond the wide territories of the Boer Republic. However, in the end I accepted the proposal of my generous rescuer, and arrangements were made accordingly . . .

The afternoon of the 18th dragged slowly away. I remember that I spent the greater part of it reading Stevenson's *Kidnapped*. Those thrilling pages which describe the escape of David Balfour and Alan Breck in the glens awakened sensations with which I was only too familiar. To be a fugitive, to be a hunted man, to be "wanted," is a mental experience by itself. The risks of the battlefield, the hazards of the bullet or the shell are one thing. Having the police after you is another. The need for concealment and deception breeds an actual sense of guilt very undermining to morale. Feeling that at any moment the officers of the law may present themselves or any stranger may ask the questions, "Who are you?" "Where do you come from?" "Where are you going?"—to which questions no satisfactory answer could be given—gnawed the structure of selfconfidence. I dreaded in every fibre the ordeal which awaited me at Komati Poort and which I

must impotently and passively endure if I was to make good my escape from the enemy.

In this mood I was startled by the sound of the rifle-shots close at hand, one after another at irregular intervals. A sinister explanation flashed through my mind. The Boers had come! Howard and his handful of Englishmen were in open rebellion in the heart of the enemy's country! I had been strictly enjoined upon no account to leave my hiding-place behind the packing-cases in any circumstances whatever, and I accordingly remained there in great anxiety. Presently it became clear that the worst had not happened. The sounds of voices and presently of laughter came from the office. Evidently a conversation amicable, sociable in its character was in progress. I resumed my companionship with Alan Breck. At last the voices died away, and then after an interval my door was opened and Mr. Howard's pale, sombre face appeared, suffused by a broad grin. He relocked the door behind him and walked delicately towards me, evidently in high glee.

"The Field Cornet has been here," he said. "No, he was not looking for you. He says they caught you at Waterval Boven yesterday. But I didn't want him messing about, so I challenged him to a rifle match at bottles. He won two pounds off me and has gone away delighted.

"It is all fixed for tonight," he added.

"What do I do?" I asked.

"Nothing. You simply follow me when I come for you."

At two o'clock on the morning of the 19th I awaited, fully dressed, the signal. The door opened. My host appeared. He beckoned. Not a word was spoken on either side. He led the way through the front office to the siding where three large bogie trucks stood. Three figures, evidently Dewsnap and the miners, were strolling about in different directions in the moonlight. A gang of Kaffirs were busy lifting an enormous bale into the rear-most truck. Howard strolled along to the first truck and walked across the line past the end of it. As he did so he pointed with his left hand. I nipped on to the buffers and saw before me a hole between the wool bales and the end of the truck, just wide enough to squeeze into. From this there led a narrow tunnel formed of wool bales into the centre of the truck. Here was a space wide enough to lie in, high enough to sit up in. In this I took up my abode.

Three or four hours later, when gleams of daylight had reached me through the interstices of my shelter and through chinks in the boards of the flooring of the truck, the noise of an approaching engine was heard. Then came the bumping and banging of coupling-up. And again, after a further pause, we started rumbling off on our journey into the unknown.

I now took stock of my new abode and of the resources in munitions and supplies with which it was furnished. First there was a revolver. This was a moral support, though it was not easy

to see in what way it could helpfully be applied to any problem I was likely to have to solve. Secondly, there were two roast chickens, some slices of meat, a loaf of bread, a melon, and three bottles of cold tea. The journey to the sea was not expected to take more than sixteen hours, but no one could tell what delay might occur to ordinary commercial traffic in time of war.

There was plenty of light now in the recess in which I was confined. There were many crevices in the boards composing the sides and floor of the truck, and through these the light found its way between the wool bales. Working along the tunnel to the end of the truck, I found a chink which must have been nearly an eighth of an inch in width, and through which it was possible to gain a partial view of the outer world. To check the progress of the journey I had learnt by heart beforehand the names of all the stations on the route. I can remember many of them today: Witbank, Middelburg, Bergendal, Belfast, Dalmanutha, Machadodorp, Waterval Boven, Waterval Onder, Elands, Nooidgedacht, and so on to Komati Poort. We had by now reached the first of these. At this point the branch line from the mine joined the railway. Here, after two or three hours' delay and shunting, we were evidently coupled up to a regular train, and soon started off at a superior and very satisfactory pace.

All day long we travelled eastward through the Transvaal; when darkness fell we were laid up for the night at a station which, according to my reckoning, was Waterval Boven. We had accomplished nearly half of our journey. But how long should we wait on this siding? It might be for days; it would certainly be until the next morning. During all the dragging hours of the day I had lain on the floor of the truck occupying my mind as best I could, painting bright pictures of the pleasures of freedom, of the excitement of rejoining the Army, of the triumph of a successful escape—but haunted also perpetually by anxieties about the search at the frontier, an ordeal inevitable and constantly approaching. Now another apprehension laid hold upon me. I wanted to go to sleep. Indeed, I did not think I could possibly keep awake. But if I slept I might snore! And if I snored while the train was at rest in the silent siding, I might be heard. And if I were heard! I decided in principle that it was only prudent to abstain from sleep, and shortly afterwards fell into a blissful slumber from which I was awakened the next morning by the banging and jerking of the train as the engine was again coupled to it.

Between Waterval Boven and Waterval Onder there is a very steep descent which the locomotive accomplishes by means of a rack and pinion. We ground our way down this at three or four miles an hour, and this feature made my reckoning certain that the next station was, in fact, Waterval Onder. All this day, too, we rattled through the enemy's country, and late in the afternoon we reached the dreaded Komati Poort. Peeping through my chink, I could see this was a considerable place, with numerous tracks of rails and several trains standing on them. Numbers of

people were moving about. There were many voices and much shouting and whistling. After a preliminary inspection of the scene I retreated, as the train pulled up, into the very centre of my fastness, and covering myself up with a piece of sacking lay flat on the floor of the truck and awaited developments with a beating heart.

Three or four hours passed, and I did not know whether we had been searched or not. Several times people had passed up and down the train talking in Dutch. But the tarpaulins had not been removed, and no special examination seemed to have been made of the truck. Meanwhile darkness had come on, and I had to resign myself to an indefinite continuance of my uncertainties. It was tantalising to be held so long in jeopardy after all these hundreds of miles had been accomplished, and I was now within a few hundred yards of the frontier. Again I wondered about the dangers of snoring. But in the end I slept without mishap.

We were still stationary when I awoke. Perhaps they were searching the train so thoroughly that there was consequently a great delay! Alternatively, perhaps we were forgotten on the siding and would be left there for days or weeks. I was greatly tempted to peer out, but I resisted. At last, at eleven o'clock, we were coupled up, and almost immediately started. If I had been right in thinking that the station in which we had passed the night was Komati Poort, I was already in Portuguese territory. But perhaps I had made a mistake. Perhaps I had miscounted. Perhaps there was still another station before the frontier. Perhaps the search still impended. But all these doubts were dispelled when the train arrived at the next station. I peered through my chink and saw the uniform caps of the Portuguese officials on the platform and the name Resana Garcia painted on a board. I restrained all expression of my joy until we moved on again. Then, as we rumbled and banged along, I pushed my head out of the tarpaulin and sang and shouted and crowed at the top of my voice. Indeed, I was so carried away by thankfulness and delight that I fired my revolver two or three times in the air as a feu de joie. None of these follies led to any evil results.

It was late in the afternoon when we reached Lourenço Marques. My train ran into a goods yard, and a crowd of Kaffirs advanced to unload it. I thought the moment had now come for me to quit my hiding-place, in which I had passed nearly three anxious and uncomfortable days. I had already thrown out every vestige of food and had removed all traces of my occupation. I now slipped out at the end of the truck between the couplings, and mingling unnoticed with the Kaffirs and loafers in the yard—which my slovenly and unkempt appearance well fitted me to do—I strolled my way towards the gates and found myself in the streets of Lourenço Marques.

Burgener was waiting outside the gates. We exchanged glances. He turned and walked off into the town, and I followed twenty yards behind. We walked through several streets and turned a

number of corners. Presently he stopped and stood for a moment gazing up at the roof of the opposite house. I looked in the same direction, and there—blest vision!—I saw floating the gay colours of the Union Jack. It was the British Consulate.

The secretary of the British Consul evidently did not expect my arrival. "Be off," he said. "The Consul cannot see you today. Come to his office at nine tomorrow, if you want anything."

At this I became so angry, and repeated so loudly that I insisted on seeing the Consul personally at once, that that gentleman himself looked out of the window and finally came down to the door and asked me my name. From that moment every resource of hospitality and welcome was at my disposal. A hot bath, clean clothing, an excellent dinner, means of telegraphing—all I could want.

I devoured the file of newspapers which was placed before me. Great events had taken place since I had climbed the wall of the State Model Schools. The Black Week of the Boer War had descended on the British Army. General Gatacre at Stormberg, Lord Methuen at Magersfontein, and Sir Redvers Buller at Colenso, had all suffered staggering defeats, and casualties on a scale unknown to England since the Crimean War. All this made me eager to rejoin the Army; and the Consul himself was no less anxious to get me out of Lourenço Marques, which was full of Boers and Boer sympathisers. Happily the weekly steamer was leaving for Durban that very evening; in fact, it might almost be said it ran in connection with my train. On this steamer I decided to embark.

The news of my arrival had spread like wildfire through the town, and while we were at dinner the Consul was at first disturbed to see a group of strange figures in the garden. These, however, turned out to be Englishmen fully armed who had hurried up to the Consulate determined to resist any attempt at my recapture. Under the escort of these patriotic gentlemen I marched safely through the streets to the quay, and at about ten o'clock was on salt water in the steamship *Induna*.

I reached Durban to find myself a popular hero. I was received as if I had won a great victory. The harbour was decorated with flags. Bands and crowds thronged the quays. The Admiral, the General, the Mayor pressed on board to grasp my hand. I was nearly torn to pieces by enthusiastic kindness. Whirled along on the shoulders of the crowd, I was carried to the steps of the town hall, where nothing would content them but a speech, which after a becoming reluctance I was induced to deliver. Sheaves of telegrams from all parts of the world poured in upon me, and I started that night for the Army in a blaze of triumph.

Here, too, I was received with the greatest goodwill. I took up my quarters in the very platelayer's hut within one hundred yards of which I had a little more than a month before been taken prisoner, and there with the rude plenty of the Natal campaign celebrated by a dinner to many friends my good fortune and Christmas Eve.

★

O Wise Beasts

Both ox and ass, adoring in the byre
In mute acclaim pay homage to our Sire.
Congaudeat turba fidelium

And when to Bethlehem they came,
Birds sang in every tree,
And Mary in the stable sat,
With Jesus on her knee;
And while the oxen munched their hay,
The kings with one accord
Placed gold and frankincense and myrrh
Before their infant Lord . . .
CHARLES DALMON, *Ballad of the Epiphany*

In the Starlight

The beasts on the hillside made gentle noises in the dark. They were dimly visible in the starlight and curiously restless. Koz felt that whatever had disturbed them was past and they were now settling again. In the hollows of the hills the cold was intense. No word was spoken as they climbed the stone causeway to the town. Within its streets, in spite of the lateness of the hour, there was a certain activity, for the census had filled the place to overflowing. Shadowy, anonymous humanity huddled in doorways, propped itself against white walls, or walked the pavements with slow somnambulistic steps. On the edge of the cliff, overhanging the highroad, a house stood back against the sky. Close by the house the wall was pierced by a postern . . .

They entered, and found themselves in a courtyard, vast in the

darkness, around the walls of which stood the shelters for the ubiquitous ass and ox. In a far corner light spilled through a tattered curtain. They crossed the yard and, as they approached the distant aureole, Koz realised how stretched his senses were. Expectancy, fear of death, these he had known before, but this intense sensation was something more profound and beyond anything he had ever known.

It was the girl he had seen seated upon the ass. She was lying on a thick layer of straw, and in the soft radiance of the lamp the exquisite beauty of her face struck, like a sword, through his soul . . . Here, in the presence of this child, if never before, or ever again, Koz knew that he touched the hem of the Eternal's garment . . .

W. J. PYNE, *The First Nowell*

Christmas Eve

Christmas Eve, and twelve of the clock,
" Now they are all on their knees,"
An elder said as we sat in a flock
By the embers in hearthside ease.

We pictured the meek mild creatures where
They dwelt in their strawy pen,
Nor did it occur to one of us there
To doubt they were kneeling then.

So fair a fancy few would weave
In these years! Yet, I feel,
If someone said on Christmas Eve,
" Come; see the oxen kneel

" In the lonely barton by yonder coomb
Our childhood used to know,"
I should go with him in the gloom,
Hoping it might be so.

THOMAS HARDY, *The Oxen*

" In Russia," said Horace Bordenby, who was staying in the house as a Christmas guest, " I've read that the peasants believe that if you go into a cow-house or stable at midnight on Christmas Eve you will hear the animals talk. They're supposed to have the gift of speech at that one moment of the year."

" Oh, *do* let's all go down to the cow-house and listen to what they've got to say! " exclaimed Beryl . . .

SAKI, *Bertie's Christmas Eve*

Christmas Guests

On Christmas Eve we decorated the croft with greenery, clipped candles to a small artificial fir and hung coloured glass balls and lengths of tinsel on the branches . . . On our first Christmas at the croft we had unthinkingly placed a real fir, appropriately decorated, on a cane table. Hearing an ominous splintering of glass, we rushed into the parlour to find a silver ball lying broken on the floor and the tree rocking back and forth precariously as the two squirrels clung to its branches . . . Cuthbert had managed to get himself entwined with tinsel and it was several minutes before we were able to free him . . .

We put out an extra quantity of food for the birds on Christmas morning, looking on them as our guests, as no human friends were able to visit us. Each animal was given a treat in the way of food. A tin of sardines was opened for Lora and the otters. Rodney and Sara had nuts and raisins. We unwrapped presents received from friends months before as well as those sent especially for an animal. Rodney received his felt balls and one year a package addressed to Lora was found to contain a drum and beater, sent by a young cousin of mine.

"Oh, horror!" said Aunt Miriam, opening it.

Much to our relief Lora effectively rendered this gift useless by sitting on the vellum, which promptly tore.

"Has she learnt to play the drum yet?" came an inquiry by post the following spring.

"I'm sorry to have to tell you . . ." I wrote back.

Another letter in reply to mine was received in due course. "Never mind," wrote the kindly donor, "I'm saving up to buy her another."

ROWENA FARRE, *Seal Morning*

Winter Praise

. . . shepherds saw through flame and smoke
Strange lights upon the fields.
The rain told how it lashed a darkened world
And smote three heaving camels' backs,
The folded sheep upon their knees,
The steaming, midnight ox.
And when its drops seeped through the rafters' cracks
They splashed upon the rutted floor,
And saw from all their flashing eyes,
Deep-bedded in the golden straw,
A Child asleep, all eyes on fire with love,
The stable lamp beside the creaking door,
And heard the heavens close and sigh above.

LEONARD CLARK

A MIRACLE OF RARE DEVICE

Without so much as moving, he put his big hand across the sun

BY RAY BRADBURY

ON A DAY neither too mellow nor too tart, too hot nor too cold, the ancient tin lizzie came over the desert hill travelling at commotion speed. The vibration of the various armoured parts of the car caused road-runners to spurt up in floury bursts of dust. Gila monsters, lazy displays of Indian jewellery, took themselves out of the way. Like an infestation, the Ford clamoured and dinned away into the deeps of the wilderness.

In the front seat, squinting back, Old Will Bantlin shouted, "Turn off!"

Bob Greenhill spun-swung the lizzie off behind a billboard. Instantly, both men turned. Both peered over the crumpled top of their car, praying to the dust they had wheeled up on the air.

"Lay down! Lay low! Please . . ."

And the dust blew slowly down.

Just in time.

"Duck!"

A motorcycle, looking as if it had burnt through all nine rings of hell, thundered by. Hunched over its oily handlebars, a hurricane figure, a man with a creased and most unpleasant face, goggled and sun-devilled, leaned on the wind. Roaring bike and man flung away down the road.

The two old men sat up in their lizzie, exhaling.

"So long, Ned Hopper," said Bob Greenhill.

"Why?" said Will Bantlin, "why's he always tailing us?"

"Willy-William, talk sense," said Greenhill. "We're his luck, his Judas goats. Why should he let us go, when trailing us around the land makes him rich and happy and us poor and wise?"

The two men looked at each other, half in, half out of their smiles. What the world hadn't done to them, thinking about it had. They had enjoyed thirty years of nonviolence together, in

their case meaning nonwork. "I feel a harvest coming on," Will would say, and they'd clear out of town before the wheat ripened. Or, "Those apples are ready to fall!" So they'd stand back about three hundred miles so as not to get hit on the head.

Now Bob Greenhill slowly let the car, in a magnificent controlled avalanche, drift back out on the road.

"Willy, friend, don't be discouraged."

"I've been through 'discouraged,'" said Will. "I'm knee-deep in 'accepting.'"

"Accepting what?"

"Finding a treasure chest of tinned beans one day and no tin opener. Finding a thousand tin openers next day and no beans."

Bob Greenhill listened to the engine talking to itself like an old man under the hood, sounding like sleepless nights and rusty bones and well-worn dreams.

"Our bad luck can't last for ever, Willy."

"No, but it sure tries. You and me sell ties and who's across the street ten cents cheaper?"

"Ned Hopper."

"We strike gold in Tonopah and who registers the claim first?"

"Old Ned."

"Haven't we done him a lifetime of favours? Aren't we overdue for something just ours, that never winds up his?"

"Time's ripe, Willy," said Robert, driving calmly. "Trouble is, you, me, Ned, never really decided what we wanted. We've run through all the ghost towns, see something, grab. Ned sees and grabs, too. He don't want it, he just wants it because *we* want it. He keeps it till we're out of sight, then tears it up and hangdogs after us for more litter. The day we really know what we want is the day Ned gets scared of us and runs off for ever. Ah, hell." Bob Greenhill breathed the clear fresh-water air running in morning streams over the windscreen. "It's good anyway. That sky. Those hills. The desert and . . ."

His voice faded.

Will Bantlin glanced over. "What's wrong?"

"For some reason—" Bob Greenhill's eyes rolled, his leathery hands turned the wheel slow—"we got to . . . pull off . . . the road . . ."

The lizzie bumped on the dirt shoulder. They drove down in a dusty wash and up out and suddenly along a dry peninsula of land overlooking the desert. Bob Greenhill, looking hypnotised, put out his hand to turn the ignition key. The old man

under the hood stopped complaining about insomnia and slept.

"Now, why did you do *that*?" asked Will Bantlin.

Bob Greenhill gazed at the wheel in his suddenly intuitive hands. "Seemed as if I had to. Why?" He blinked up. He let his bones settle and his eyes grow lazy. "Maybe only to look at the land out there. Good. All of it been here a billion years."

"Except for that city," said Will Bantlin.

"City?" said Bob.

He turned to look and the desert was there and the distant hills the colour of lions and far out beyond, suspended in a sea of warm morning sand and light, was a kind of floating image, a hasty sketch of a city.

"That can't be Phœnix," said Bob Greenhill. "Phœnix is ninety miles off. No other big place around . . ."

Will Bantlin rumpled the map on his knees, searching.

"No . . . no other town."

"It's coming clearer!" cried Bob Greenhill, suddenly.

They both stood absolutely straight up in the car and stared over the dusty windscreen, the wind whining softly over their craggy faces.

"Why, you know what that is, Bob? A mirage! Sure, that's it! Light rays just right, atmosphere, sky, temperature. City's the other side of the horizon somewhere. Look how it jumps, fades in and out. It's reflected against that sky up there like a mirror and comes down here where we can see it! A mirage, by gosh!"

"That *big*?"

Will Bantlin measured the city as it grew taller, clearer in a shift of wind, a soft far whirlabout of sand.

"The granddaddy of them all! That's not Phœnix. Not Santa Fé or Alamogordo, no. Let's see. It's not Kansas City—"

"That's too far off, anyway—"

"Yeah, but look at those buildings. Big! Tallest in the world. Only one place like that in the world."

"You don't mean—New York?"

Will Bantlin nodded slowly and they both stood in the silence looking out at the mirage. And the city was tall and shining now and almost perfect, in the early morning light.

"Oh my," said Bob, after a long while. "That's fine."

"It is," said Will.

"But," said Will, a moment later, whispering, as if afraid the city might hear, "what's it doing three thousand miles from home, here in the middle of Nowhere, Arizona?"

Bob Greenhill gazed and spoke. "Willy, friend, never question nature. It just sits there and minds its knitting. Radio waves, rainbows, northern lights, all that, heck, let's just say a great big picture got took of New York City and is being developed here, three thousand miles away on a morn when we need cheering, just for us."

"Not just us." Will peered over the side of the car. "Look!"

There in the floury dust lay cross-hatchings, diagonals, fascinating symbols printed out in a quiet river of travelling.

"Tyre marks," said Bob Greenhill. "Lots of cars pulled off here."

"For what, Bob?" Will Bantlin leapt from the car, landed on the earth, tromped it, turned on it, knelt to touch it with a swiftly and suddenly trembling hand. "For what, for what? To see the mirage? Yes, sir! To see the mirage!"

"So?"

"Boy howdy!" Will stood up, thrummed his voice like a motor. "Brrrummm!" He turned an imaginary wheel. He ran along a tyre track. "Brrrummm! Eeeee! Brakes on! Robert-Bob, you know what we *got* here? Look east! Look west! This is the only point in miles you can pull off the highway and sit and stare your eyes out!"

"Sure, it's nice people have an eye for beauty—"

"Beauty, my socks! Who *owns* this land?"

"The state, I reckon . . ."

"You reckon wrong! You and me! We set up camp, register a claim, improve the property and according to law it's *ours* . . . right?"

"Hold on!" Bob Greenhill was staring out at the desert, and the strange city there. "You mean you want to . . . *homestead a mirage*?"

"Right, by zingo! Homestead a mirage!"

Robert Greenhill stepped down and wandered round the car looking at the tyre-treaded earth. "Can we *do* that?"

"*Do* it? Excuse my dust!"

In an instant, Will Bantlin was pounding tent pegs in the soil, stringing twine.

"From here to here, and here to here, it's a gold mine, we pan it; it's a cow, we milk it; it's a lake full of money, we swim in it!"

Rummaging in the car, he heaved out cases and brought forth a large cardboard which had once advertised cheap cravats. This, reversed, he painted over with a brush and began lettering.

"Willy," said his friend, "nobody's going to pay to see any darned old—"

"Mirage? Put up a fence, tell folks they can't see a thing, and that's just their itch. There!"

He held up the sign.

SECRET VIEW MIRAGE
THE MYSTERIOUS CITY
25c per car Motorbikes a dime

"Here comes a car. Watch!"

"William—"

But Will, running, lifted the sign.

"Hey! Look! Hey!"

The car roared past, a bull ignoring the matador.

Bob shut his eyes so as not to see Will's smile wiped away.

But then—a marvellous sound.

The squeal of brakes.

The car was backing up! Will was leaping forward, waving, pointing.

"Yes, sir! Yes, ma'am! Secret View Mirage! The Mysterious City! Drive right in!"

The tyre marks in the simple dirt became numerous, and then, quite suddenly, innumerable.

A great boll of heat-wafted dust hung over the dry peninsula where in a vast sound of arrivals, with braked wheels, slammed doors, stilled engines, the cars of many kinds from many places came and took their places in a line. And the people in the cars were as different as people can be who come from four directions but are drawn in a single moment by a single thing, all talking at first, but growing still at last at what they saw out in the desert. The wind blew softly about their faces, fluttering the hair of the women, the open shirt-collars of the men. They sat in their cars for a long time, or they stood on the rim of the earth, saying nothing, and at last one by one turned to go.

As the first car drove back out past Bob and Will, the woman in it nodded happily. "Thanks! Why, it *is* just like Rome!"

"Did she say 'Rome' or 'home'?" asked Will.

Another car wheeled towards the exit.

"Yes, sir!" The driver reached out to shake Bob's hand. "Just looking made me feel I could speak French!"

"French?" cried Bob.

Both stepped forward swiftly as the third car made to leave. An old man sat at the wheel, shaking his head.

"Never seen the like. I mean to say, fog and all, Westminster Bridge, better than a postcard, and Big Ben off there in the distance. How do you *do* it? God bless. Much obliged."

Both men, disquieted, let the old man drive away, then slowly

wheeled to look out along their small thrust of land towards the growing simmer of noon.

"Big Ben?" said Will Bantlin. "Westminster Bridge? Fog?"

Faintly, faintly, they thought they heard, they could not be sure, they cupped their ears, wasn't that a vast clock striking three times off there beyond land's rim? Weren't foghorns calling after boats and boat sirens calling back on some lost river?

"Almost speak French?" whispered Robert. "Big Ben? Home? Rome? *Is* that Rome out there, Will?"

The wind shifted. A broiling surge of warm air tumbled up, plucking changes on an invisible harp. The fog almost solidified into grey stone monuments. The sun almost built a golden statue on top of a breasted mount of fresh-cut snow marble.

"How—" said William Bantlin, "how could it change? How could it be four, five cities? Did we *tell* anyone what city they'd see? No. Well then, Bob, *well*!"

Now they fixed their gaze on their last customer who stood alone at the rim of the dry peninsula. Gesturing his friend to silence, Robert moved silently to stand to one side and behind their paying visitor.

He was a man in his late forties with a vital, sunburnt face, good, warm, clear-water eyes, fine cheekbones, a receptive mouth. He looked as if he had travelled a long way in his life, over many deserts, in search of a particular oasis. He resembled those architects found wandering the rubbled streets below their buildings as the iron, steel, and glass go soaring high to block out, fill an empty piece of sky. His face was that of such builders who suddenly see reared up before them on the instant, from horizon to horizon, the perfect implementation of an old, old dream. Now, only half aware of William and Robert beside him, the stranger spoke at last in a quiet, an easy, a wondrous voice, saying what he saw, telling what he felt:

"*In Xanadu . . .*"

"What?" asked William.

The stranger half smiled, kept his eyes on the mirage, and quietly, from memory, recited.

"*In Xanadu did Kubla Khan*
A stately pleasure-dome decree:
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
Through caverns measureless to man
Down to a sunless sea . . ."

His voice spelled the weather and the weather blew about the other two men and they became more still.

" So twice five miles of fertile ground
With walls and towers were girdled round:
And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills,
Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree;
And here were forests ancient as the hills,
Enfolding sunny spots of greenery . . ."

William and Robert looked out at the mirage and what the stranger said was there, in the golden dust, some fabled Middle East or Far East clustering of minarets, domes, frail towers risen up in a magnificent sift of pollen from the Gobi, a spread of river stone baked bright by the fertile Euphrates, Palmyra not yet ruins, only just begun, newly minted, then abandoned by the departing years, now shimmered by heat, now threatening to blow away for ever.

The stranger, his face transformed, beatified by his vision, finished it:

" It was a miracle of rare device, -
A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice . . ."

And the stranger grew silent.

Which made the silence in Bob and Will all the deeper.

The stranger fumbled with his wallet, his eyes wet.

" Thank you, thank you."

" You've already paid us," said William.

" If I had more, you'd get it all."

He gripped William's hand, left a five-dollar bill in it, got in his car, looked for a last time out at the mirage, then sat down, started the car, idled it with wonderful ease and, face glowing, eyes peaceful, drove away.

Robert walked a few steps after the car, stunned.

Then William suddenly exploded, flung his arms up, whooped, kicked his feet, wheeled round.

" Hallelujah! Fat of the land! Full dinner pails! New squeaky shoes! Look at my fistfuls! "

But Robert said, " I don't think we should take it."

William stopped dancing. " What? "

Robert looked steadily at the desert.

" We can't ever really own it. It's way out there. Sure, we can homestead the land, but . . . We don't even know what *that* thing is."

" Why, it's New York and—"

" Ever *been* to New York? "

" Always wanted. Never did."

" Always wanted, never did." Robert nodded slowly. " Same as them. You heard: Paris. Rome. London. And this last

man. Xanadu. Willy, Willy, we got hold of something strange and big here. I'm scared we won't do right by it."

"Well, we're not keeping anyone out, are we?"

"Who knows? Might be too much to charge for some. It don't seem right, a natural thing handled by unnatural rules. Look and tell me I'm wrong."

William looked.

And the city was there like the first city he had seen as a boy when his mother took him on a train across a long meadow of grass early one morning and the city rose up head by head, tower by tower to look at him, to watch him coming near. It was that fresh, that new, that old, that frightening, that wonderful.

"I think," said Robert, "we should take just enough to buy petrol for a week, put the rest of the money in the first poor-box we come to. That mirage is a clear river running, and people coming by thirsty. If we're wise, we dip one cup, drink it cool in the heat of the day and go. If we stop, build dams, try to own the whole river . . ."

William, peering out through the whispering dust wind, tried to relax, accept.

"If you say so."

"I don't. The wilderness all around says."

"Well, I say *different*!"

Both men jumped and spun about.

Half up the slope stood a motorcycle. Sitting it, rainbowed with oil, eyes goggled, grease masking his stubbly cheeks, was a man of familiar arrogance and free-running contempt.

"Ned Hopper!"

Ned Hopper smiled his most evilly benevolent smile, unbraked the cycle and glided the rest of the way down to halt by his old friends.

"You—" said Robert.

"Me! Me! Me!" Ned Hopper honked his cycle horn three times, laughing loud, head back. "Me!"

"Shut up!" cried Robert. "Bust it like a mirror."

"Bust *what* like a mirror?"

William, catching Robert's concern, glanced apprehensively out beyond at the desert.

The mirage flurried, trembled, misted away, then hung itself like a tapestry once more on the air.

"Nothing out there! What you guys up to?" Ned peered down at the tread-marked earth. "I was twenty miles on, today, when I realised you boys was hiding back behind. Says to myself, that ain't like my buddies who led me to that goldmine in '47, lent me this cycle with a dice roll in '55. All those years

we help each other and now you got secrets from friend Ned. So I come back. Been up on that hill half the day, spying." Ned lifted binoculars from his greasy jacket front. "You know I can read lips? Sure! Saw all the cars zip in here, the cash. Quite a show you're running!"

"Keep your voice down," warned Robert. "So long."

Ned smiled sweetly. "Sorry to see you go. But I surely respect your getting off my property."

"Yours!" Robert and William cried, caught themselves, and said in a trembling whisper, "yours?"

Ned laughed. "When I saw what you was up to, I just cycled into Phœnix. See this little-bitty Government paper sticking out my back pocket?"

The paper was there, neatly folded. William put out his hand.

"Don't give him the pleasure," said Robert.

William pulled his hand back. "You want us to believe you filed a homestead claim?"

Ned shut up the smile inside his eyes. "I do. I don't. Even if I was lying, I could still make Phœnix on my bike quicker'n your jalopy." Ned surveyed the land with his binoculars. "So just put down all the money you earned from two this afternoon, when I filed my claim, from which time on you was trespassing on my land."

Robert flung the coins in the dust. Ned Hopper glanced casually at the bright litter.

"The U.S. Government Mint! Hot dog, nothing out there, but dumb bunnies willing to pay for it!"

Robert turned slowly to look at the desert. "You don't see anything?"

Ned snorted. "Nothing and you *know* it!"

"But we do!" cried William. "We—"

"Will," said Robert.

"But, Bob!"

"Nothing out there. Like he said." Bob winked.

More cars were driving up now in a great thrum of engines.

"Excuse, gents, got to mind the box office!" Ned strode off, waving. "Yes, sir, ma'am! This way! Cash in advance!"

"Why?" William watched Ned Hopper run off, yelling. "Why are we letting him do this?"

"Wait," said Robert, almost serenely. "You'll see."

They got out of the way as a Ford, a Buick, and an ancient Moon motored in.

Twilight. On a hill about two hundred yards above the Mysterious City Mirage viewpoint, William Bantlin and Robert

Greenhill fried and picked at a small supper, hardly bacon, mostly beans. From time to time, Robert used some battered opera glasses on the scene below.

"Had thirty customers since we left this afternoon," he observed. "Got to shut down soon, though. Only ten minutes of sun left."

William stared at a single bean on the end of his fork. "Tell me again: why? Why every time our luck is good, Ned Hopper jumps out of the earth?"

Robert sighed on the opera-glass lenses and wiped them on his cuff. "Because, friend Will, we are the pure in heart. We shine with a light. And the villains of the world they see that light beyond the hills and say, 'Why, now there's some innocent, sweet all-day sucker.' And the villains come to warm their hands at us. I don't know what we can do about it, except maybe put out the light."

"I wouldn't want to do that," William brooded gently, his palms to the fire. "It's just, I was hoping this time was come-uppance time. A man like Ned Hopper, living his white underbelly life, ain't he about due for a bolt of lightning?"

"Due?" Robert screwed the opera glasses tighter into his eyes. "Why, it just struck! O, ye of little faith!" William jumped up beside him. They shared the glasses, one lens each, peering down.

"Look!"

For far below, Ned Hopper was stomping around outside a car. People gesticulated at him. He handed them some money. The car drove off. Faintly, you could hear Ned's anguished cries.

William gasped. "He's giving money back! Now he almost hit that man there. The man shook his fist at him! Ned's paid him back too! Look—more fond farewells!"

"Yah-hee!" whooped Robert, happy with his half of the glasses.

Below, all the cars were dusting away now. Old Ned did a violent kicking dance, threw his goggles in the dust, tore down the sign, let forth a terrible oath.

"Dear me," mused Robert. "I'm glad I can't hear them words. Come on, Willy!"

As William Bantlin and Robert Greenhill drove back up to the Mysterious City turnoff, Ned Hopper rocketed out in a screaming fury. Braying, roaring on his cycle, he hurled the painted cardboard through the air. The sign whistled up, a boomerang. It hissed, narrowly missing Bob. Long after Ned was gone in his banging thunder, the sign sank down and lay on the earth where William picked it up and brushed it off.

It was twilight indeed now and the sun touching the far hills and the land quiet and hushed and Ned Hopper gone away, and the two men alone in the abandoned territory in the thousand-tyred dust, looking out at the sand and the strange air.

"Oh no . . ." said William.

"I'm afraid . . . yes," said Robert.

The desert was empty in the pink gold light of the setting sun. The mirage was gone. A few dust devils whirled and fell apart, way out on the horizon, but that was all.

William let out a huge groan of bereavement.

"*He* did it! Ned! Ned Hopper, come back, you! Oh, dammit, Ned, you spoilt it all! Blast you to Perdition!"

He stopped.

"Bob, how can you *stand* there?"

Robert smiled sadly. "Right now, I'm feeling sorry for Ned Hopper."

"Sorry!"

"He never saw what we saw. He never saw what anybody saw. He never believed for one second. And you know what? Disbelief is catching. It rubs off on people."

William searched the disinhabited land.

"Is *that* what happened?"

"Who knows?" Robert shook his head. "One thing sure: when folks drove in here, the city, the cities, the mirage, whatever, was there. But it's awful hard to see when people stand in your way. Without so much as moving, Ned Hopper put his big hand across the sun. First thing you know, theatre's closed for good."

"Can't we—" William hesitated —"can't we open it up again? How? How do you bring a thing like that back?"

They let their eyes play over the sand, the hills, the few lone clouds, the sky emptied of wind and very still.

"Maybe if we just look out the sides of our eyes, not direct at it, relax, take it easy . . ."

They both looked down at their shoes, their hands, the rocks at their feet, anything.

But at last William mourned. "*Are* we? Are we the pure in heart?"

Robert laughed just a little bit.

"Oh, not like the kids who came through here today and saw anything they wanted to see, and not like the big simple people born in the wheatfields and by God's grace wandering the world and will never grow up. We're neither the little children nor the big children of the world, Willy, but we are one thing: glad to be alive. We know the air mornings on the road, how the

stars go up and then down in the sky. Old Ned, he stopped being glad a long time ago. I hate to think of him driving his cycle on the road the rest of the night, the rest of the year . . ."

As he finished this, Robert noticed that William was sliding his eyes carefully to one side, towards the desert.

Robert whispered, carefully, " *See* anything . . .? "

William sighed. " No. Maybe . . . tomorrow . . ."

A single car came down the highway.

The two men glanced at each other. A wild look of hope flashed in their eyes. But they could not quite bring themselves to fling up their hands and yell. They simply stood with the painted sign held in their arms.

The car roared by.

The two men followed it with their wishful eyes.

The car braked. It backed up. In it were a man, a woman, a boy, a girl. The man called out, " You closed for the night? "

William said, " It's no use—"

Robert cut in. " He means, ' No use giving us money! ' Last customer of the day, and family. Free! On the house! "

" Thank you, neighbour, thank you! "

The car roared on to the viewpoint.

William seized Robert's elbow. " Bob, what ails you? Disappoint those kids, that nice family? "

" Hush up," said Robert gently. " Come on."

The kids piled out of the car. The man and his wife climbed slowly out into the sunset. The sky was all gold and blue now, and a bird sang somewhere in the fields of sand.

" Watch," said Robert.

And they moved up to stand behind the family where it lined up now to look out over the desert.

William held his breath.

The man and wife squinted into the twilight uneasily.

The kids said nothing. Their eyes flexed and filled with a distillation of late sunlight.

William cleared his throat. " It's late. Uh—can't see too well—"

The man was going to reply, when the boy said, " Oh, we can see—fine! "

" Sure! " The girl pointed. " There! "

The mother and father followed her gesture, as if it might help, and it did.

" Lord," said the woman, " for a moment I thought—but now —yes—there it is! "

The man read his wife's face, saw a thing there, borrowed it, and placed it on the land and in the air.

"Yes," he said, at last. "Oh yes."

William stared at them, the desert, and then at Robert, who smiled and nodded.

The faces of the father, the mother, the daughter, the son were glowing now, looking off at the desert.

"Oh," murmured the girl, "is it *really* there?"

And the father nodded, his face bright with what he saw that was just within seeing and just beyond knowing. He spoke as if he stood alone in a great forest church.

"Yes. And, Lord . . . it's beautiful."

William started to lift his head, but Robert whispered, "Easy. It's coming. Don't try. Easy, Will."

And then William knew what to do.

"I," he said, "I'm going to go stand with the kids."

And he walked slowly over and stood right behind the boy and girl. He stood for a long time there, like a man between two warm fires on a cool evening, and they warmed him and he breathed soft and at last let his eyes drift up, let his attention wander easy out towards the twilight desert and the hoped-for city in the dusk.

And there in the dust softly blown high from the land, re-assembled on the wind into half-shapes of towers and spires, and minarets, was the mirage.

He felt Robert's breath on his neck, close, whispering, half-talking to himself.

"*It was . . . a miracle of rare device . . .*
A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice . . ."

And the city was there.

And the sun set and the first stars came out.

And the city was very clear, as William heard himself repeat, aloud or perhaps for only his secret pleasure:

"*It was a miracle of rare device . . .*"

And they stood in the dark until they could not see.

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MERRY CHRISTMAS, YOU-ALL

The men who writes the Christmas rhymes,
They all inhabits frigid climes.
Their roofs is fluffy, I have heared,
With snow like Santa Claus's beard.
Icicles decorate their nose,
And chilblains nips their mistletoes.

OGDEN NASH

LAURA

by
Arthur Weigall

ALL camels are discontented. They hate being camels, but they would hate to be anything else, because in their opinion all other living creatures are beneath contempt, especially human beings. The expression upon their faces when they pass you on the road indicates that they regard you as a bad smell.

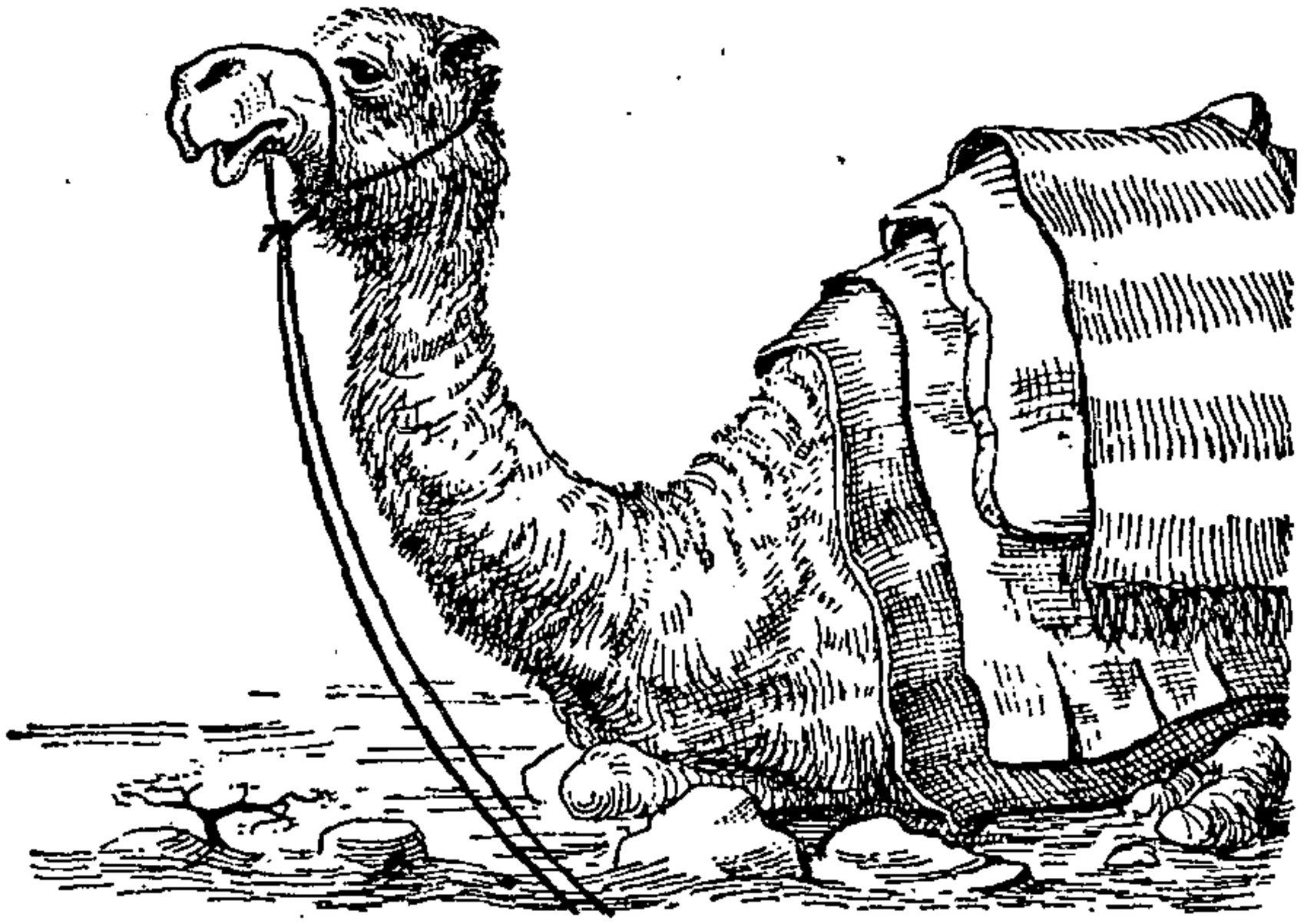
They nurse a perpetual grievance against mankind, and ruminate upon their wrongs until they groan aloud. Yet when you go to them to find out what is the matter they give you no hint of any specific trouble, but merely look at you with sad, reproachful eyes and groan more loudly, or, in certain cases when their sense of unbearable insult is overwhelming, try rather half-heartedly to bite you.

The fact that a camel has yellow teeth, a harelip, a hump, and corns, and suffers from halitosis, places the poor creature beyond the range of ordinary sympathy: people, I mean to say, never put their arms around camels, or stroke or kiss them; and yet their sorrowful eyes, fringed with long, languishing lashes, are beautiful, and their whimpering is heartbreaking.

Camels do not ask for love or pity. They have been domesticated and enslaved for so long that they make no response whatsoever to overtures of that sort, but continue to loathe and despise you no matter how kindly you treat them or how well you feed them. The very sight of you makes them feel sick, and their one request seems always to be that they be allowed to go away and die.

Their days are irksome to them; they have no hope; unlike many animals, they have no rudiments of religion; they make no friends: they just complain and unwillingly submit. When they are being ridden they do not attempt to cooperate with their riders; and when they are being used as beasts of burden they protest indignantly but ineffectually against their loads, and try their best to make you feel a cad.

In the days when I was Inspector-General of Antiquities in



Egypt, I had a horse, a donkey, and a camel: the horse for ordinary riding; the donkey—one of those big, white Egyptian donkeys which are almost the size of a mule—for making my daily rounds among the temples and excavations which were in my charge; and the camel for desert work. The camel was a swift-footed, soft-going mare who hated me with all the gentle fervour of her gloomy heart, and everlastingly wished she had never been born, sheltered though her life was and easy her work. Her name was Laura, but she neither knew nor cared.

Laura came into my possession in somewhat remarkable circumstances. Her father was a veteran of the war in the Sudan who carried two bullets in his scarred old body, yet could run sixty or eighty miles a day without distress, and could jump low walls and hurdles like a horse. Her mother belonged to the desert tribe of the Ababdeh, and lived in a tiny oasis near the Red Sea, where, one early morning in the spring, when the birds were singing and the breeze was rustling the leaves of the palms, the old veteran had found her beside the well, having broken his tether and strayed from the camp of the desert police patrol by whom he was employed.

Eleven months later Laura was born, and when she was but a few weeks old I chanced to be out exploring for deserted settlements and other remains of antiquity in this neighbourhood, and made her acquaintance at dead of night, the meeting being due to the fact that she had wandered into my camp and had tripped over my tent rope, thereby causing herself to be mistaken in the darkness for a robber and nearly shot. We caught her after a wild chase which I thought was a manhunt, and next day, being in

need of an extra hired camel, I took her mother and her along with me.

After that she passed into the hands of a kindly Egyptian farmer, and when she had been weaned after the customary twelve months, and had been employed in light work about the farm for five or six years, I got her a job in the tourist business.

In this capacity she was assigned the task, one day, of carrying a young French nobleman to a picnic luncheon in the desert some ten miles back from a certain popular resort on the Nile; but she was not feeling as energetic as the other camels in the party, and everybody else had arrived at the appointed place before she and her exasperated rider were within half a mile of it. When at last she trotted up the luncheon was spread upon the rocks, and one of the party was about to open a bottle of champagne.

The Frenchman, hot and tired, threw down his stick and the guiding rope attached to her head harness, and was angrily wondering how to make her kneel so that he might get off the saddle perched on her hump, when suddenly the cork shot out of the champagne bottle with a loud pop and hit her on the nose; and at this more than ordinary insult she swung round and set off at a gallop for home.

The other camels were all tethered some little distance away, and, anyhow, nobody thought till too late of giving chase, since they supposed that she would soon be under control. But she did not stop, and the passionate curses of her infuriated and frightened rider merely served to urge her along.

At the pace they were going he did not dare jump or slide from his lofty perch on to the iron-hard rocks of the desert; and all he could do was to cling on with hands and legs, while the very teeth in his head rattled. He lost his hat almost at once, and the the burning sun nearly boiled such brains as he possessed; while a terrible thirst, made acute by the sight of the champagne, consumed him.

I chanced to see him at the door of the hotel, where Laura had consented at last to stop and kneel down. He was almost crying with vexation and pain; his face was scarlet; his eyes were wild; and he had hiccups. Indeed, I could not blame him when he tottered round to Laura's rear and gave her a kick which drew a wail of agony from him but did not much worry Laura. She merely looked round at him with reproachful eyes, and uttered her usual outraged and melancholy moan.

Later in the day, when the party returned, I was able to calculate that she had made the journey at a record pace; and I bought her.

Years afterwards, when she was full grown, that is to say, when

she was about fifteen, she proved to be one of the strongest runners of her kind. I rode her on several long expeditions which I made into the Egyptian desert, and on one of these trips she carried me two hundred miles in four days without drinking. But that, I should explain is nothing remarkable, for camels can go ten days without water, and keep up an average pace of eight to ten miles an hour for six or eight hours during the first three or four days. When they are able to be properly watered they can run a hundred miles a day, though sixty is generally considered a good, hard journey, and is certainly as much as I, personally, ever cared to do.

Like all camels, Laura was supremely stupid. For instance, she could never be taught to understand that she must remain crouched until her rider was in the saddle, and must not scramble to her feet just at the moment when he was mounting. A camel's saddle is a sagging square of leather covered with a thick sheepskin, and is supported on a high, padded framework which fits round the hump and is fastened by a girth under the body. The rider sits on this lofty throne with his legs crossed in front of him on the curve of the camel's neck, which is his footstool; and when the camel is crouching ready to be mounted the top of the saddle is about four feet from the ground.

To mount without help you have to lift your foot to this height, rest it on top of the saddle, take hold of the pommel with your hand, and then make a jump for it; but at the first touch Laura used to get up, and unless my jump was perfectly timed, she would either carry me up with her, hanging perilously by my hands to the saddle with one leg higher than my head, or else, if I had not yet grasped the pommel, up would go my one raised leg and as likely as not I would be thrown on my back. If you lift one leg as high as you can and then get somebody to jerk your foot upwards, you will see what I mean.

A camel crouches with his forelegs bent inwards under him, and if you are not alone, somebody puts his foot on the bent joint, and the camel will not rise until you are settled in the saddle and its leg is released. Then up you go, lurching forwards as the back legs rise, and lurching backwards as the forelegs follow suit.

Once you are up you cannot get off again until you have made certain strange noises with your tongue, which are the signal to the camel to kneel. Then down goes the awkward creature by the front, and you hang forward over its neck; and after that the hind legs double up, and you are jerked straight again, and can slide gracefully to the ground unless the camel suddenly changes its mind and gets up, in which case your descent is more spectacular.

Laura always watched me out of the corner of her eye until she caught me at a disadvantage; but when I swore at her she only gazed at me with the sorrowfully accusing expression of her race, and uttered her inconsolable grumbles which seemed so clearly to say, "It's your own fault for bullying a poor girl like me." But how she could run! That is why I kept her.

A camel, by the way, can do more than look at you out of the corner of an eye; it can turn its head completely round and stare at you full in the face with both eyes. I do not know anything more disconcerting than this. There you are, sitting high up on the hump and prodding the creature's neck with your stick, that being the only way to guide it, since the rope is for checking the pace; and suddenly, when these prods have become intolerable, round comes the head, and two lovely, mournful eyes gaze at you with a mixture of loathing, contempt, accusation, and despair. You can only say, "I beg your pardon;" but that look has shown you that your apology will not be accepted. As a human being you are beyond pardon.

Once, while I was still young at the business, I told Laura to kneel while we were descending the slope of a hill; and, her stupidity being even greater than mine, she did so. The slope, however, was so steep that her back legs left the ground, and for a frightful moment she was balanced upon her front knees, with her hindquarters in the air. Those who were watching said that the thing was unique in their experience; but Laura *was* unique.

On another occasion I was using her in carrying two heavy boxes held in rope nets, one on either side of the saddle, when the ropes on the right side gave way and that box fell to the ground. The weight of the other box caused her two right legs to leave the ground, and there she was hopping round in circles on her two left legs. This again was declared to be unparalleled.

There are, of course, two kinds of camel. One is the Bactrian which has two humps, and long, shaggy hair; but the kind used in Egypt is the Arabian, which has only one hump, and has short, sandy-coloured or whitish hair. The hump is a store of fatty flesh which is reabsorbed when necessary into the general system: when the camel is well fed, the hump is hard and big; when food is scarce, it sags and looks empty.

In the stomach there is a water-reserve which holds more than a gallon, the moisture being passed into the body gradually when there is no drinking to be had. That is why camels are so valuable for desert journeys; and, indeed, they have obviously evolved in the desert, for their flat padded feet are designed for treading on soft sand or hard rocks, and their nostrils are furnished with muscles which can close them up in a sandstorm.

It is not customary to allow a riding-camel to walk, because the motion is rolling and unpleasant, and you lurch from side to side in a sickly manner which suggests a reason for calling the camel the "ship of the desert." It is usual to keep up a jog-trot, for in this case you simply bump up and down in the saddle like a cavalry trooper, the bumps becoming bigger and better as the pace increases to a gallop.

When you have not ridden for some time you are a wreck at the end of the first day's journey, every bone seeming to have shaken loose; but very quickly the muscles adjust themselves, and the shaking positively renews your youth, and is a wonderful weight-reducer.

Laura, however, used to add to the fun by occasionally jumping over low rocks and clumps of scrub, a habit she must have inherited from her father; but she never fell. In fact, I have never heard of a camel falling, for they can throw their long legs out in any direction on the instant, and though they trip they never come down.

Laura had a keen sense of smell, and could detect water several miles away. When I saw her stretch her neck and felt her increasing her pace I knew that we were nearing a well; and, indeed, this ability once pretty well saved my life, for I happened to lose my way when riding alone far ahead of my caravan, and was wandering about hopelessly among rocky valleys and open spaces, picturing the tortures of death by thirst, when suddenly she pointed her head down the wind and went off at a gallop, and soon we reached the well which was our rendezvous.

One hot and hazy afternoon, while I was camping with Laura on the outskirts of a riverside village in Lower Nubia, about a thousand miles up the Nile, a large native cattle-ship came into view, carried dreamily downstream upon the current with sails furled; and from it there drifted to my ears across the quiet and mirror-like water the strangest of sounds I have ever heard.

Monkeys seemed to be chattering and parrots shrieking, and everything that grunts was grunting; while now and then there were the muffled sounds of lions roaring, elephants trumpeting, and hyenas laughing. It might have been the Ark itself, afloat upon the wide waters; and I picked up my fieldglasses almost with the expectation of seeing Mr. and Mrs. Noah standing scratching themselves on the poop.

Instead, however, I saw the figure of an English friend of mine, with a parrot on his shoulder, an infant baboon holding his hand, and a giraffe looking down at him over the wooden palings of its temporary stable on the deck. The nature of the strange vessel

then became apparent, for this personage was a big-game hunter and trapper sometimes employed by the Cairo Zoo; and it was clear that he was coming down from the Sudan with a shipload of animals he had collected up there in the wilds.

I hailed him presently as he went by, and he shouted back that he would moor for the night at a point two or three miles farther along, where the yellow sands of the uninhabited desert could be seen sloping right down to the water and there would be some chance of avoiding the curiosity of the native villagers. The melancholy and aggrieved lady Laura was already saddled to take me for my usual afternoon hunt for ancient ruins among the unexplored hills and valleys a few miles back from the river; so after a while I mounted her and trotted off, followed by Pedro, my dog.

We overtook the ship just as it had bumped against the bank and all the animals were picking themselves up and swearing in their different fashions; and at this outburst Pedro at once turned tail and raced for a nearby rock, from the top of which he barked like one possessed, while Laura, trembling with fear, became so unmanageable that at last I had to lower myself from the lofty saddle, drop to the ground, and hang on to her nose rope with all my weight until I found something to hitch it to.

When I got back to the Ark I was invited to come aboard and inspect the animals, and the next half hour, I may mention incidentally, was one of memorable horror. I was taken down below into a pungent atmosphere in comparison to which Laura's morning yawn was mountain air; and there I was introduced to the creatures of the jungle at such close quarters that my efforts to keep out of their reach shrank me to half my size.

I was led across a thin plank bridging a sunken tank full of leering crocodiles; I was made to walk along narrow gangways between insecure cages from which lions' paws scooped and dabbed at me; the long arm of a female baboon shot out and raised my hat to herself; and from an elephant's trunk damp dust was blown down my ear.

When the nightmare was over my friend asked me if I would oblige him by taking a baby elephant for a walk on a lead; and this I did, but the little fellow conceived a violent hatred of Pedro and, pulling himself free, chased him across the sand with ears extended like wings and trunk thrust out stiffly. The chase brought us all to the spot where Laura was tethered, and after we had gone several times round her in circles, the little elephant and I got together again amidst her four sprawling legs.

At the best of times Laura, like all camels, was on the lookout for insult; and she regarded this affair as a flagrant instance of

my deliberate endeavours to vex her. She stared with outraged gloomy eyes first at me and then at the small ungainly elephant who was making noises like a pig, after which she turned away with an expression of unspeakable disgust. If nature had given her fingers instead of cloven pads she would have held her nose, but even as it was she curled back her lip and compressed her nostrils, uttering that indignant burble of hers which was at once a demand for an apology and a refusal to accept one.

The elephant, meanwhile, was pulling so hard at his rope, and Pedro was making such a nuisance of himself, barking and running round us just out of reach, while Laura was tugging so resentfully at her tether, that I suddenly conceived the idea of fastening the elephant's rope to the camel's saddle so that they could pull against each other and thus give me a chance to deal with the dog who was really causing all the trouble.

The plan succeeded at first, and I had effectually silenced Pedro, when Laura's tether gave way and she and the elephant went careering off, zigzagging about as one or the other got the better of the tussle, while I pounded after them over the soft sand, the perspiration streaming down my face and the impassioned oaths rolling from my lips. At one moment the elephant was being dragged on his back in a cloud of dust; at the next he was pulling Laura sideways so that one or more of her long legs left the ground and she seemed about to topple over.

In the end the twists and turns resulted in the elephant finding himself right under Laura, with his head facing towards her rear: it looked, in fact, as though he were carrying the camel on his sturdy little back. Then suddenly up went his trunk between her hind legs and curled itself round her tail, and at this she abandoned the struggle, lifted her head to heaven, and uttered an outraged wail of anguish as though she were calling upon the high gods to avenge the insult.

The noise attracted the attention of my friend on the boat, and he and some of his men came to the rescue; but Laura, I fancy, never forgave me. Her expression seemed to indicate that she believed the whole thing to have been a practical joke of mine in execrable taste, and that she thought me the most unspeakable cad. She had always loathed all men, anyway; but she had never realised till now, so it seemed, the depths of our infamy.

Whether she was being worked hard or whether she was crouching in the sun munching her beans, she always stared disdainfully and indignantly at me with her nose turned up in the invincible belief that she was a superior but wronged being. Native legend says that this supercilious expression is assumed because whereas the most pious human being knows only ninety-nine of

the hundred names of God, the camel knows the hundredth; but Laura, I think, was an atheist and had no hope of happiness either in this life or in the next.

Eternally she used to chew the cud and hiccup in my face to show me what she thought of things, or dribble biliously as she pondered upon her superiority and the indignities she had nevertheless to suffer, hating the sight of me but being too downhearted to do anything about it—except when I took hold of her nose rope, at which she uttered her ineffectual complaint, opening her mouth sickly as though she had tasted something that had gone bad, and if I patted her she positively howled.

I want to correct the common belief that horses hate the odour of camels, and shy or show fear in some way or other when they scent one. My own horse, Filfil, never showed any objection to the smell nor have I ever seen a horse who did. But what I noticed was that Filfil was sometimes startled by Laura's or any other camel's contortions, and was inclined to get nervous when he could not make head or tail of some unusual attitude.

Laura, you see, like all her race, did very peculiar things with her anatomy. For instance, when I had dismounted and she was standing about waiting, she would perhaps curve her body and stretch her neck round until she could nibble at her tail, or she would rest her chin upon her own saddle, or scratch her ear with her hindleg, or do something odd like that.

Occasionally, she used to bend her neck downwards and inwards between her forelegs, and try to bite herself in the stomach; and naturally it was frightening to a horse following behind to see in the road a strange, decapitated creature with a face upside down beneath its middle and a pair of inverted eyes staring vacantly from between its straddling hindlegs. I have known Filfil rear up in horror at such a spectacle.

Laura became a mother when she was about ten; and although she was not a large animal as camels go, her foal stood three feet high when it was a week old. In the spring the male camels attract the attention of the females by making gurgling noises like water running out of the bath, and inflating their tongues until they hang out of their mouths like pink balloons. Laura could not resist these blandishments on the part of a magnificently disdainful he-camel who hailed from down Suez way and was in the transport business; and as she appeared to be all wrought up in her own melancholy fashion, we arranged a marriage.

A year after the foal was born, I may mention, when she was at work with me in the desert again, we once made use of her milk as do the Arabs. It was thick and rich, but we found that it

curdled in tea or coffee, and the natives told me that it does not provide butter. In this regard I may add that camel flesh is sometimes eaten, and is said to resemble veal; but I have not tried it.

I have sometimes heard it said that camels are delicate and difficult to rear, but as far as I know the death-rate is really pretty low under ordinary conditions, considering the poor food they usually get. Laura, it is true, sometimes went sick—had colic, for instance, and had to be given a dose of a couple of quarts of linseed oil; and in winter she occasionally had a cold in her head and used to mope about with her nose running.

But the birth of her foal gave her no trouble, and the foal itself was healthy enough, so that I fancy it is all a matter of proper food and care. Friends of mine in the Army have told me that the camels used in desert warfare recover rapidly from bullet wounds, and do not seem to be much distressed when they are hit; but I suppose this depends on the camel. Laura, I know, nearly wrecked our hospital at Luxor when an abscess in her hump was lanced.

The fact is that a camel so often looks as though the very sight of you had made everything turn on its stomach; and its various expressions of loathing, together with its endless groans and complainings, make you think that it cannot be in good health. I used to watch Laura *teaching* her foal to grumble. When she saw me coming she would start bleating and bubbling, and she would put her head close to her infant's as she did so, in order that the sounds might be imitated.

Heaven knows I always treated her and her offspring with kindness, but I never saw the light of love in the eye of either of them. Nobody, in fact, has ever heard of a camel being interested in any living thing except itself; and as for love . . .

But, no, I am wrong: Laura did love her foal for the first few months of its awkward, leggy little life, yet in the end she gave it a nip with her yellow teeth and the small creature kicked her in the ribs in return, and after that they each went their dreary ways with their noses in the air and their hearts full of their grievances.

I am going to end with a little epilogue. A short time ago I was motoring with some friends along an English country road one hot summer's afternoon, and was nearly dropping off to sleep when my drowsy attention was caught by something lying upon the ground. We had passed over it before its significance had dawned upon me; but unconsciously my thoughts began to turn back to the happy years of my long residence in Egypt, and

the sights and sounds of that far country recreated themselves in my sleepy mind with curious vividness.

A few minutes later I observed the same astonishing thing in the middle of the road, and this time I sat up and gave it another look from the back window. I supposed that I was dreaming and that something about the summer's day had carried my memory to the sandy wastes beside the Nile and thus had made my eyesight play tricks on me.

Half a mile farther on our way, however, I was again spellbound by what lay upon the road, and I clapped my hand to my forehead with a stifled exclamation. In vision my puzzled brain beheld the face of Laura, with the half-contemptuous, half-accusing expression in her beautiful eyes which was so characteristic of her melancholy race; and behind her the dazzling background of the sun-bathed desert formed itself in my imagination, and I thought that I was suffering from delusions.

"What's the matter?" asked one of my companions, who had noticed that I was feeling my pulse.

"Camels!" I gasped, pointing to the roadway as yet once again the phenomenon presented itself. "That's camels' spoor!"

But it was no delusion. A bend in the road brought us suddenly in sight of a travelling circus, and at the tail of the procession, sure enough, there walked three gloomy camels who bleated their inconsolable vexation as with grinding brakes we swerved to avoid them.

"By jove, Orpingham—the summit! We've made it! We've made it!"

FOR ALL THE RUDE PEOPLE

"I'm not paid to be polite, and I like tearing up passes"

BY JACK RITCHIE

"HOW old are you?" I asked.

His eyes were on the revolver I was holding. "Look mister, there's not much in the cash register, but take it all. I won't make no trouble."

"I am not interested in your filthy money. How old are you?"

He was puzzled. "Forty-two."

I clicked my tongue. "What a pity. From your point of view, at least. You might have lived another twenty or thirty years if you had just taken the very slight pains to be polite."

He didn't understand.

"I am going to kill you," I said, "because of the four-cent stamp and because of the cherry candy."

He did not know what I meant by the cherry candy, but he did know about the stamp.

Panic raced into his face. "You must be crazy. You can't kill me just because of that."

"But I can."

And I did . . .

When Dr. Briller told me that I had but four months to live, I was of course perturbed. "Are you positive you haven't mixed up the X-rays? I've heard of such things."

"I'm afraid not, Mr. Turner."

I gave it more earnest thought. "The laboratory reports. Perhaps my name was accidentally attached to the wrong . . ."

He shook his head slowly. "I double-checked."

It was late afternoon and the time when the sun is tired. I rather hoped that when my time came to actually die, it might be in the morning. Certainly more cheerful.

"In cases like this," Dr. Briller said, "a doctor is faced with a dilemma. Shall he or shall he not tell his patient? I always tell mine. That enables them to settle their affairs and to have a fling, so to speak." He pulled a pad of paper towards him.

" Also I'm writing a book. What do you intend doing with your remaining time? "

" I really don't know. I've only been thinking about it for a minute or two, you know."

" Of course," Briller said. " No immediate rush. But when you do decide, you will let me know, won't you? My book concerns the things that people do with their remaining time when they know just when they're going to die."

He pushed aside the pad. " See me every two or three weeks. That way we'll be able to measure the progress of your decline."

Briller saw me to the door. " I already have written up twenty-two cases like yours." He seemed to gaze into the future. " Could be a best-seller, you know."

I have always lived a quiet life. Not an unintelligent one, but quiet.

I have contributed nothing to the world—and in that I have much in common with almost every soul on earth—but on the other hand I have not taken away anything either. I have, in short, asked merely to be left alone. Life is difficult enough without undue association with people.

What can one do with the remaining four months of a quiet life?

I have no idea how long I walked and thought on that subject, but eventually I found myself on the long curving bridge that sweeps down to join the lake drive. The sounds of mechanical music intruded themselves upon my mind and I looked down.

A circus, or very large carnival, lay below.

It was the world of shabby magic, where the gold is gilt,where the top-hatted ringmaster is as much a gentleman as the medals on his chest are authentic, and where the pink ladies on horseback are hard-faced and narrow-eyed. It was the domain of the harsh-voiced vendors and the short-change.

I have always felt that the demise of the big circus may be counted as one of the cultural advances of the twentieth century, yet I found myself descending the footbridge and in a few moments I was on the midway between the rows of stands where human mutations are exploited and exhibited for the entertainment of all children.

Eventually, I reached the big top and idly watched the bored ticket-taker in his elevated box at one side of the main entrance.

A pleasant-faced man leading two little girls approached and presented cardboard rectangles which appeared to be passes.

The ticket-taker ran his finger down a printed list at his side. His eyes hardened and he scowled down at the man and the

children for a moment. Then slowly and deliberately he tore the passes to bits and let the fragments drift to the ground. "These are no damn good," he said.

The man below him flushed. "I don't understand."

"You didn't leave the posters up," the ticket-taker snapped. "Beat it!"

The children looked up at their father, their faces puzzled. Would he do something about this?

He stood there and the white of anger appeared on his face. He seemed about to say something, but then he looked down at the children. He closed his eyes for a moment as though to control his anger, and then he said, "Come on, kids. Let's go home." He led them away, down the midway, and the children looked back, bewildered, but saying nothing.

I approached the ticket-taker. "Why did you do that?"

He glanced down. "What's it to you?"

"Perhaps a great deal."

He studied me irritably. "Because he didn't leave up the posters."

"I heard that before. Now explain it."

He exhaled as though it cost him money. "Our advance man goes through a town two weeks before we get there. He leaves posters advertising the show any place he can—grocery stores, shoe shops, meat markets—any place that will paste them in the window and keep them there until the show comes to town. He hands out two or three passes for that. But what some of these jokers don't know is that we check. If the posters aren't still up when we hit town, the passes are no good."

"I see," I said dryly. "And so you tear up the passes in their faces and in front of their children. Evidently that man removed the posters from the window of his little shop too soon. Or perhaps he had those passes *given* to him by a man who removed the posters from his window."

"What's the difference? The passes are no good."

"Perhaps there is no difference in that respect. But do you realise what you have done?"

His eyes were narrow, trying to estimate me and any power I might have.

"You have committed one of the most cruel of human acts," I said stiffly. "You have humiliated a man before his children. You have inflicted a scar that will remain with him and them as long as they live. He will take those children home and it will be a long, long way. And what can he say to them?"

"Are you a cop?"

"I am not a cop. Children of that age regard their father as

the finest man in the world. The kindest, the bravest. And now they will remember that a man had been bad to their father—and he had been unable to do anything about it."

"So I tore up his passes. Why didn't he buy tickets? Are you a city inspector?"

"I am not a city inspector. Did you expect him to *buy* tickets after that humiliation? You left the man with no recourse whatsoever. He could not *buy* tickets and he could not create a well-justified scene because the children were with him. He could do nothing. Nothing at all, but retreat with two children who wanted to see your miserable circus and now they cannot."

I looked down at the foot of his stand. There were the fragments of many more dreams—the debris of other men who had committed the capital crime of not leaving their posters up long enough. "You could at least have said, 'I'm sorry, sir. But your passes are not valid.' And then you could have explained politely and quietly why."

"I'm not paid to be polite." He showed yellow teeth. "And, mister, I *like* tearing up passes. It gives me a kick."

And there it was. He was a little man who had been given a little power and he used it like a Caesar.

He half rose. "Now get the hell out of here, mister, before I come down there and chase you out."

Yes. He was a man of cruelty, a two-dimensional animal born without feeling and sensitivity and fated to do harm as long as he existed. He was a creature who should be eliminated from the face of the earth. If only I had the power to . . .

I stared up at the twisted face for a moment more and then turned on my heel and left. At the top of the bridge I got a bus and rode to the sports shop at thirty-seventh street.

I purchased a .32 calibre revolver and a box of cartridges.

Why do we *not* murder? Is it because we do not feel the moral justification for such a final act? Or is it more because we fear the consequences if we are caught—the cost to us, to our families, to our children?

And so we suffer wrongs with meekness, we endure them because to eliminate them might cause us even more pain than we already have.

But I had no family, no close friends. And four months to live.

The sun had set and the carnival lights were bright when I got off the bus at the bridge. I looked down at the midway and the man was still in his box.

How should I do it? I wondered. Just march up to him and shoot him as he sat on his little throne?

The problem was solved for me. I saw him replaced by

another man—apparently his relief. He lit a cigarette and strolled off the midway towards the dark lake front.

I caught up with him round a bend concealed by bushes. It was a lonely place, but close enough to the carnival so that its sounds could still reach me.

He heard my footsteps and turned. A tight smile came to his lips and he rubbed the knuckles of one hand. "You're asking for it, mister." His eyes widened when he saw my revolver.

"How old are you?" I asked.

"Look, mister," he said swiftly. "I've only got a couple of tens in my pocket."

"How old are you?" I repeated.

His eyes flicked nervously. "Thirty-two."

I shook my head sadly. "You could have lived into your seventies. Perhaps forty more years of life, if only you had taken the simple trouble to act like a human being."

His face whitened. "Are you off your rocker or something?"

"A possibility."

I pulled the trigger.

The sound of the shot was not as loud as I had expected, or perhaps it was lost against the background of the carnival noises.

He staggered and dropped to the edge of the path and he was quite dead.

I sat down on a nearby park bench and waited.

Five minutes. Ten. Had no one heard the shot?

I became suddenly conscious of hunger. I hadn't eaten since noon. The thought of being taken to a police station and being questioned seemed unbearable. And I had a headache, too.

I tore a page from my pocket notebook and began writing.

A careless word may be forgiven. But a lifetime of cruel rudeness cannot. This man deserves to die.

I was about to sign my name, but then I decided that my initials would be sufficient for the time being. I did not want to be apprehended before I had a good meal and some aspirins.

I folded the page and put it into the dead ticket-taker's pocket.

I met no one as I returned up the path and ascended the footbridge. I walked to Weschler's, probably the finest restaurant in the city. The prices are, in normal circumstances, beyond me, but I thought that this time I could indulge myself.

After dinner, I decided an evening bus ride might be in order. I rather enjoyed that form of city excursion and, after all, my freedom of movement would soon become restricted.

The driver of the bus was an impatient man and clearly his passengers were his enemies. However, it was a beautiful night and the bus was not crowded.

At sixty-eighth street, a fragile, whitehaired woman with cameo features waited at the kerb. The driver grudgingly brought his vehicle to a stop and opened the door.

She smiled and nodded to the passengers as she put her foot on the first step, and one could see that her life was one of gentle happiness and very few bus rides.

"Well!" the driver snapped. "Is it going to take you all day to get in?"

She flushed and stammered. "I'm sorry." She presented him with a five-dollar bill.

He glared. "Haven't you any change?"

The flush deepened. "I don't think so. But I'll look."

The driver was evidently ahead of his schedule and he waited. And one other thing was clear. He was enjoying this.

She found a quarter and held it up timorously.

"In the box!" he snapped.

She dropped it into the box.

The driver moved his vehicle forward jerkily and she almost fell. Just in time, she managed to catch hold of a strap.

Her eyes went to the passengers, as though to apologise for herself—for not having moved faster, for not having immediate change, for almost falling. The smile trembled and she sat down.

At eighty-second, she pulled the buzzer cord, rose, and made her way forward.

The driver scowled over his shoulder as he came to a stop. "Use the rear door. Don't you people ever learn to use the rear door?"

I am all in favour of using the rear door. Especially when a bus is crowded. But there were only half a dozen passengers on this bus and they read their newspapers with frightened neutrality.

She turned, her face pale, and left by the rear door.

The evening she had had, or the evening she was going to have, had now been ruined. Perhaps many more evenings with the thought of it.

I rode the bus to the end of the line.

I was the only passenger when the driver turned it round and parked.

It was a deserted, dimly lit corner, and there were no waiting passengers at the small shelter at the kerb. The driver glanced at his watch, lit a cigarette, and then noticed me. "If you're taking the ride back, mister, put another quarter in the box. No free riders here."

I rose from my seat and walked slowly to the front of the bus. "How old are you?"

His eyes narrowed. "That's none of your business."

"About thirty-five, I'd imagine," I said. "You'd have had another thirty years or more ahead of you." I produced the revolver.

He dropped the cigarette. "Take the money," he said.

"I'm not interested in money. I'm thinking about a gentle lady and perhaps the hundreds of other gentle ladies and the kind, harmless men and the smiling children. You are a criminal. There is no justification for what you do to them. There is no justification for your existence."

And I killed him.

I sat down and waited.

After ten minutes, I was still alone with the corpse.

I realised that I was sleepy. Incredibly sleepy. It might be better if I turned myself in to the police after a good night's sleep.

I wrote my justification for the driver's demise on a sheet of notepaper, added my initials, and put the page in his pocket.

I walked four blocks before I found a taxi and took it to my apartment building. I slept soundly and perhaps I dreamed. But if I did, my dreams were pleasant and innocuous, and it was almost nine before I awoke.

After a shower and a leisurely breakfast, I selected my best suit. I remembered I had not yet paid that month's telephone bill. I made out a cheque and addressed an envelope. I discovered that I was out of stamps. But no matter, I would get one on the way to the police station.

I was almost there when I remembered the stamp. I stopped at a corner drugstore. It was a place I had never entered before.

The proprietor sat behind the soda fountain reading a newspaper, and a salesman was writing in an order book.

The proprietor did not look up when I entered, and he spoke to the salesman. "They've got his fingerprints on the notes, they've got his handwriting, and they've got his initials. What's wrong with the police?"

The salesman shrugged. "What good are fingerprints if they are not in the police files? The same goes for the handwriting if you've got nothing to compare it with. And how many thousand people in the city have the initials L. T.?" He closed his book. "I'll be back next week."

When he was gone, the druggist continued reading the newspaper.

I cleared my throat.

He finished reading a long paragraph and then looked up. "Well?"

"I'd like a four-cent stamp, please."

It appeared almost as though I had struck him. He stared at me for fifteen seconds and then he left his stool and slowly made his way to the rear of the store towards a small barred window.

I was about to follow him, but a display of pipes at my elbow caught my attention.

After a while I felt eyes upon me and looked up.

The druggist stood at the far end of the store, one hand on his hip and the other disdainfully holding the single stamp. "Do you expect me to bring it to you?"

And now I remembered a small boy of six who had had five pennies. Not just one this time, but five, and this was in the days of penny candies.

He had been entranced at the display in the showcase—the fifty varieties of sweet things, and his mind had revolved in a pleasant indecision. The red whips? The liquorice? But not the candy cherries. He didn't like those.

And then he had become conscious of the druggist standing beside the display case—tapping one foot. The druggist's eyes had smouldered with irritation—no, more than that—with anger. "Are you going to take all day for your lousy nickel?"

He had been a sensitive boy and he had felt as though he had received a blow. His precious five pennies were now nothing. This man despised them. And this man despised him.

He pointed numbly and blindly. "Five cents of that."

When he left the store he had found that he had the candy cherries. But that didn't really matter. Whatever it had been, he couldn't have eaten it.

Now I stared at the druggist and the four-cent stamp and the narrow hatred for anyone who did not contribute directly to his profits. I had no doubt that he would fawn if I purchased one of his pipes. But I thought of the four-cent stamp and the bag of cherry candy I had thrown away so many years ago.

I moved towards the rear of the store and took the revolver out of my pocket. "How old are you?"

When he was dead, I did not wait longer than necessary to write a note. I had killed for myself this time and I felt the need of a drink. I went several doors down the street and entered a small bar. I ordered a brandy and water.

After ten minutes, I heard the siren of a squad car.

The bartender went to the window. "It's just down the street." He took off his jacket. "Got to see what this is all about. If anybody comes in, tell them I'll be right back." He put the bottle of brandy on the bar. "Help yourself, but tell me how many."

I sipped the brandy slowly and watched the additional squad cars and finally the ambulance appear.

The bartender returned after ten minutes and a customer followed at his heels. "A short beer, Joe."

"This is my second brandy," I said.

Joe collected my change. "The druggist down the street got himself murdered. Looks like it was by the man who kills people because they're not polite."

The customer watched him draw a beer. "How do you figure that? Could have been just a hold-up."

Joe shook his head. "No. Fred Masters—he's got the TV shop across the street—found the body and he read the note."

The customer put a dime on the bar. "I'm not going to cry about it. I always took my business some place else. He acted as though he was doing you a favour every time he waited on you."

Joe nodded. "I don't think anybody in the neighbourhood's going to miss him. He always made a lot of trouble."

I had been about to leave and return to the drugstore to give myself up, but now I ordered another brandy and took out my notebook. I began making a list of names.

It was surprising how one followed another. They were bitter memories, some large, some small, some I had experienced and many more that I had witnessed—and perhaps felt more than the victims.

Names. And that warehouseman. I didn't know his name, but I must include him.

I remembered the day and Miss Newman. We were her sixth formers and she had taken us on another one of her excursions—this time to the warehouses along the river, where she was going to show us "how industry works."

She always planned her tours and she always asked permission of the places we visited, but this time she strayed or became lost and we arrived at the warehouse—she and the thirty children who adored her.

And the warehouseman had ordered her out. He had used language which we did not understand, but we sensed its intent, and he had directed it against us and Miss Newman.

She was small and she had been frightened and we retreated. And Miss Newman did not report to school the next day or any day after that and we learnt that she had asked for a transfer.

And I who loved her, too, knew why. She could not face us after that.

Was he still alive? He had been in his twenties then, I imagined.

When I left the bar half an hour later, I realised I had a great deal of work to do.

The succeeding days were busy ones and, among others, I found the warehouseman. I told him why he was dying because he did not even remember.

And when that was done, I dropped into a restaurant.

The waitress eventually broke off her conversation with the cashier and strode to my table. "What do you want?"

I ordered a steak and tomatoes.

The steak proved to be just about what one could expect in such a neighbourhood. As I reached for my coffee spoon, I accidentally dropped it to the floor. I picked it up. "Waitress, would you mind bringing me another spoon, please?"

She stalked angrily to my table and snatched the spoon from my hand. "You got the shakes, or something?"

She returned in a few moments and was about to deposit a spoon, with considerable emphasis, upon my table.

But then a sudden thought altered the harsh expression of her face. The descent of the arm diminuendoed, and when the spoon touched the tablecloth, it touched gently. Very gently.

She laughed nervously. "I'm sorry if I was sharp, mister."

It was an apology, and so I said, "That's quite all right."

"I mean that you can drop a spoon any time you want to. I'll be glad to get you another."

"Thank you." I turned to my coffee.

"You're not offended, are you, mister?" she asked eagerly.

"No. Not at all."

She snatched a newspaper from an empty table. "Here, sir, you can read this while you eat. I mean it's on the house. Free."

When she left me, the wide-eyed cashier stared at her. "What's all that about, Mabel?"

Mabel glanced back at me with a trace of uneasiness. "You can never tell who he might be. You better be polite these days."

As I ate I read, and an item caught my eye. A grown man had heated pennies in a frying-pan and tossed them out to some children who were making trick-or-treat rounds before Hallowe'en. He had been fined a miserable twenty dollars.

I made a note of his name and address.

Dr. Briller finished his examination. "You can get dressed now, Mr. Turner."

I picked up my shirt: "I don't suppose some new miracle drug has been developed since I was here last?"

He laughed with self-enjoyed good nature. "No, I'm afraid not." He watched me button the shirt. "By the way, have you decided what you're going to do with your remaining time?"

I had, but I thought I'd say, "Not yet."

He was faintly perturbed. "You really should, you know. Only about three months left. And be sure to let me know when you do."

While I finished dressing, he sat down at his desk and glanced at the newspaper lying there. "This killer seems to be rather busy, doesn't he?"

He turned a page. "But really the most surprising thing about the crimes seems to be the public's reaction. Have you read the Letters From the People column recently?"

"No."

"These murders appear to be meeting with almost universal approval. Some of the letter writers even hint that they might be able to supply the murderer with a few choice names themselves."

I would have to get a paper.

"Not only that," Dr. Briller said, "but a wave of politeness has struck the city."

I put on my coat. "Shall I come back in two weeks?"

He put aside the paper. "Yes. And try to look at this whole thing as cheerfully as possible. We all have to go some day."

But his day was indeterminate and presumably in the distant future . . .

My appointment with Dr. Briller had been in the evening, and it was nearly ten by the time I left my bus and began the short walk to my apartment building.

As I approached the last corner, I heard a shot. I turned into Milding Lane and found a little man with a revolver standing over a newly-dead body on the quiet and deserted pavement.

I looked down at the corpse. "Goodness. A policeman."

The little man nodded. "Yes, what I've done does seem a little extreme, but you see he was using a variety of language that was entirely unnecessary."

"Ah," I said.

The little man nodded. "I'd parked my car in front of this fire hydrant. Entirely inadvertently, I assure you. And this policeman was waiting when I returned to my car. And also he discovered that I'd forgotten my driver's licence. I would not have acted as I did if he had simply written out a ticket—for I was guilty, sir, and I readily admit it—but he was not content with that. He made embarrassing observations concerning my intelligence, my eyesight, the possibility that I'd stolen the car, and finally on the legitimacy of my birth." He blinked at a fond memory. "And my mother was an angel, sir. An angel."

I remembered a time when I'd been apprehended while

absentmindedly jaywalking. I would contritely have accepted the customary warning or even a ticket, but the officer insisted upon a profane lecture before a grinning assemblage of interested pedestrians. Most humiliating.

The little man looked at the gun in his hand. "I bought this just today and actually I'd intended to use it on the manager of my apartment building. A bully."

I agreed. "Surly fellows."

He sighed. "But now I suppose I'll have to turn myself over to the police?"

I gave it thought. He watched me.

He cleared his throat. "Or perhaps I should just leave a note? You see I've been reading in the newspapers about . . ."

I lent him my notebook.

He wrote a few lines, signed his initials, and deposited the slip of paper between two buttons of the dead officer's jacket.

He handed the notebook back to me. "I must remember to get one of these."

He opened the door of his car. "Can I drop you off anywhere?"

"No, thank you," I said. "It's a nice evening. I'd rather walk."

Pleasant fellow, I reflected, as I left him.

Too bad there weren't more like him.

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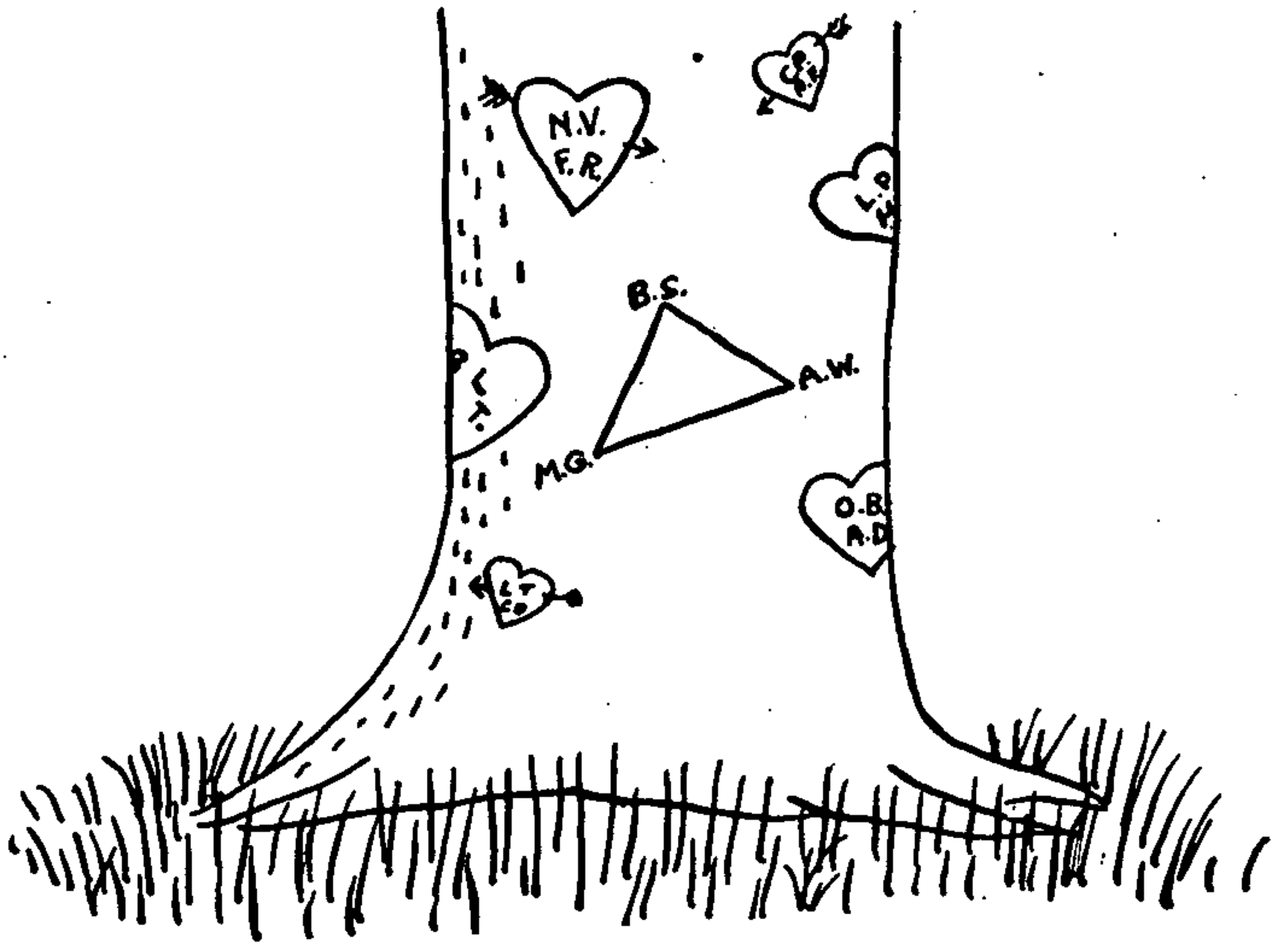

A new story by one of the Birmingham Writers' Group

Peacock of Tai-pu

by NORA ROCK

IN the days of the Emperor the mountain had been a holy place, and countless feet had made the pilgrimage to the temple, hanging, it seemed, in the clouds, anchored only by its lovely gardens alive with peacocks. But the track had long been obliterated by the landslide that rent the mountain, destroyed the temple, and heralded by a few quivering days the rise of the new Chinese Republic. Now, only the tops of tumbled stones and an occasional gleam of gilded tiles could be seen across the chasm, while at dusk the weird echo of a scream would float to the birches a thousand feet below.

From these birches a boy came running. His blue cotton blouse flew out from his khaki shorts as he leapt nimbly from one rock to another. His chest heaved with his exertions. At times he disappeared in hollows, to emerge higher and still higher above the stiff grasses and thin junipers. The afternoon sun beat on his bare head and legs, and at last he stopped for breath.

As if seeking reassurance that no one had seen him, he looked down to the village of Tai-pu, with its neat square houses, its duck-pond, the little patches of gardens and, at the end, the glistening bamboo roof of the new school. Perhaps the sight encouraged him, for he resumed his scrambling up the mountain, going on all fours over the larger boulders. It was chillier now, and a wisp of cloud drifted by.

But the lad seemed fully endowed with the confidence of nine years, and found landmarks and footholds invisible to others, had any been bold enough to approach this forbidden ground. Apart, however, from a sand lizard and a kite hanging on balanced wings, the boy was alone.

Nevertheless, he began to go more warily, bending low as

he darted from fallen tomb to stunted bush, finally wriggling flat on his stomach to the end of a smoother expanse of turf.

Leaning on his elbows, he cupped his mouth and gave a muted cry: "Pao! Pao!"

In answer, a spray of tamarisk, already heavy with a cascade of pink blossom, began to tremble. The fragile branches parted and a magnificent peacock strutted into view. Its stately neck and body were pure white, its eyes red jewels under a regal crest. Trailing its folded tail, it advanced with measured steps, lifting high each red-clawed foot in turn.

The boy fumbled in the pocket of his shorts and drew out the obvious remains of his dinner, a handful of rice and a piece of stringy meat, which he flipped neatly into the grass before the peacock. For a while the bird ignored the offering; then having considered, it would seem, the extreme youth and evident humility of the suppliant, it lowered its stately neck to pick elegantly at the food.

From where he lay prone on the sun-warmed camomile, did it occur to the boy to worship the white peacock? Was he filled with awe when the creature suddenly displayed its majestic tail in a perfect arc of green and bronze, which caught the sunlight with dazzling iridescence through which the white eye-spots glared?

The only feeling that registered on the small brown face was the universal curiosity of a boy watching a bird.

When the peacock folded its tail and disappeared through the remains of a temple-wall, the boy disappeared after it.

In the late afternoon, Kun-yi came out of his new school with the varnished bamboo roof and the sliding panel doors. Just three months it had taken him to build it, with the help of the villagers, and as he taught his little class of thirty-three children there every morning, he would glance round the new setting and tell himself that already they were part of the New China. Didn't he teach the simplified alphabet, play his tape-recorder to the children, even give them ballpoint pens for drawing? Yes, he had every reason to be proud of their progress.

Till he caught sight of Po-li.

Po-li was already squatting in his favourite place, with his old back against the coping of the well, his worn hands folded resignedly into his sleeves, and his eyes fixed on the mountain.

Kun-yi the teacher sat down beside him.

"The weather will be good for the Sowing, I think, Po-li." He lifted the roll of paper he'd brought from the school. "Would you care to hear the plans?"

"In the days of the Emperor," said Po-li impassively, "we trusted in the Peacock."

"Times change, Po-li," was the gentle answer. "The Emperor is gone, and we must trust our intelligence."

The faded brown eyes in the wrinkled face turned to Kun-yi. "Intelligence, then, is the new faith?"

"Indeed, no! Heaven is still there, but we must reach it through our intelligence." He indicated the roll of plans. "All possible thought has been taken for the Sowing. The seed is prepared, the ploughs sharpened, new ox-harness made. Tomorrow, at dawn, the first furrow will be driven in the new fields beyond the river. Each one has his allotted part: our neighbours, you, I, Chuan. By the way, where *is* Chuan today? I needed my best pupil to copy the plans."

The old man turned again to the mountain.

"One saw him hiding rice in his pocket at the meal. One saw him driving the ox to water much faster than the other boys. One saw, in the heat of the afternoon, a blue speck high on the mountain."

"Po-li, have you been filling him with ancient tales?"

"All my tales are ancient, Kun-yi. I have lived in the days of the Emperor."

"But Chuan doesn't! He mustn't strew rice to the gods. Besides, we need it, every grain! . . . It's time the boy was back."

Grandfather Po-li was unmoved. "Since you came to the

well, Kun-yi, with your head full of tomorrow's plans, and your heart shut to yesterday, I have observed him coming out of the birches. The ox walks slowly. It carries a burden. A messenger, maybe, such as we had in the days of the Peacock!"

"Old man, the days of the Peacock are over, I tell you. There will be some quite rational explanation. Where is the boy?"

For all his thick lenses, it was some moments before Kun-yi could distinguish the small figure of Po-li's grandson, carrying his bundle of osiers, and prodding before him a newly-scrubbed ox. On the beast's back drooped rather than sat the wretched figure of a man. Blood oozed through his jacket and one arm hung useless.

The villagers of Tai-pu, where every word was public and none breathed alone, hurried out in alarm, and many hands helped the stranger down. A mat was unrolled for him by the well, and a bowl of rice thrust into his good hand.

The boy driving the ox had laid his bundle down and now stood beside his grandfather. The grass in his hair and the scratches on his knees suggested nothing more than an afternoon's bird-watching. Kun-yi drew him aside.

"Chuan," he said firmly, "boys must not stray from the village, especially when given definite jobs to do. This time it appears you have an excuse. Tell me!"

"Sir, I was going to catch you another black swallowtail," began Chuan, and then, catching sight of his teacher's unsmiling face, shuffled his feet uncomfortably.

He began again. "You see, sir, I had watered and cleaned the ox, ready for the Sowing, and cut the osiers, and what with the sun on the mountain, I thought I might find p'r'aps something better than a butterfly this time . . . p'r'aps a bird, and I went a bit farther, the way the black swallowtail had shown me before. And, sir, I did find a bird, and I hid and watched it till it disappeared . . ."

"Chuan, come to the point! How did you meet this man?"

"Yes, sir, well, coming down the mountain again to get the ox where I'd tied him to a willow, there he was, the man, lying dead beside him! I thought he was dead. But he moaned, and I woke him with water, and he kept saying, 'Get to Tai-pu! Get to Tai-pu!' So I got."

"So you *came*," Kun-yi corrected him. "Thank you, Chuan."

The teacher turned to the stranger. Someone had bandaged the man's arm and bathed his face. He sat up and, recognising in Kun-yi's collar and tie and spectacles the distinguishing marks of the spokesman of the village, he seized him by the arm.

"There will be no Festival," he said rapidly. "There will

be no Spring Sowing. Last week, an Army convoy was ambushed as it left the Siangtan railway to go by road to Chengpu. All the soldiers were killed. Three lorries with arms were stolen—by bandits or guerillas—no one knows."

Kun-yi frowned. "You had no part in this?"

The stranger shook his head. "We had no part. But reprisals are being made. All villages within twenty miles are being wiped out. Yesterday, I was returning from taking my son to work in the mills at Changsha, when far off I saw the flames of my own village. I climbed a tree. I saw the people lined up by the river. The teacher was taken out and shot. Then followed—all the others. I saw my wife shot. I fainted, and fell from the tree . . ."

The man pointed to his broken arm, while fresh tears coursed down his cheeks. An uneasy murmur ran through the Tai-pu villagers. Men glanced up the mountain road. Women drew their children closer to them. Kun-yi placed his arm round the stranger's shoulders.

"And then?" he prompted gently.

The injured man made an effort. "When it was dark, I crawled along a ditch. A big grave had been dug, but some bodies were thrown in the river, and others down the well. The soldiers had made camp under the trees. By the fire sat the one with the map. He jabbed with his finger. 'Tai-pu,' I heard him say. 'Tai-pu next. A day's march.'

"I crawled away. I ran. I ran through the night. Many times I fell. I crossed the river on a log. I thought I would not get here in time, in time to tell you. They will come at dawn."

In the hush that followed, Kun-yi knelt before the stricken man. Only the ancient customs of his people, he felt, were adequate to salute such courage, and he bowed himself three times to the ground.

Rising, he caught the glance of Po-li, and for once the lined old face showed a flicker of approval. How easily at a time like this, thought Kun-yi, could the clock be put back! A moment's panic, and they would all be flocking to propitiate and implore the spirit of the mountain, the Peacock, or some other preposterous idea. Around him he sensed unseen pressures, heard unspoken thoughts of the villagers, as in a respectful unease they waited for him, like so many children.

He stepped on to the coping of the well. His glance roved over young and old alike.

"Friends, things look bad. But courage and our intelligence can save us, as they have saved the friend come among us. The Festival of the Spring Sowing must wait. Preservation of

life is of first importance. Let us now do according to my plan. Let the boys turn all the oxen loose in the jungle, and come quickly back. Better to lose the animals than ourselves.

"Let the girls drive all the ducks and geese far out on the river. Not one must suggest we are near.

"Each adult must collect a bag of rice and a bag of roots. Then dress warmly, carry the youngest children, and meet back here in one hour. By sunset, we shall leave for a safe hiding-place.

"You, friend," he said to the stranger, "must rest for an hour, then come into hiding with us. When you are well, we shall see you safely to your son at the mills in Changsha."

The villagers scurried away to their appointed jobs. Most of the younger ones were by now conditioned to plans; a few older ones looked at Po-li, and then fearfully up the mountain. Kun-yi saw, but said nothing.

He beckoned to his best pupil.

"Chuan, it is known you go on the forbidden mountain, sometimes much farther than the others. Do you know of any secret dens or hiding-places?"

The boy's face lit up, but he spoke guardedly.

"Yes, sir. The Peacock has shown me one!"

"Chuan! You listen too much to your old grandfather! I mean, have you found any caves, or holes, such as boys love to play hide-and-seek in?"

"Yes. One big enough to hold all the village, on the other side of the chasm. You go through a wall, only it's not a wall. It's broken. And steps go down . . ."

The teacher stared unbelieving. "You mean you've crossed the chasm?"

"It's easy! The swallowtail butterfly showed me stepping stones, the day I chased one for you. You go hop, hop!" Chuan jumped about in the dust.

"You say, a place big enough to hold all the village?"

Chuan nodded.

Kun-yi placed his hand firmly on the boy's shoulder. "Tonight, you will lead us there."

Kun-yi re-entered the school, an hour ago the pride of his heart, now a potential danger. The burying of precious books and apparatus in a prepared hiding-place took only minutes. The polished sliding panels were whipped out, and children scattered them in unlikely places. Only bare floors and framework remained to witness the coming march of retribution.

In less than the hour, he was back, inspecting his motley band. The children bulged in their quilted coats, while their button

eyes shone with excitement. The older folk bulged with their bundles, their mouths set and small. The village of Tai-pu had never witnessed so solemn and hushed an exodus.

"Po-li, keep close to Chuan, and restrain his eagerness," said Kun-yi. "I will stay at the rear with our friend."

Po-li bowed his head. "In the days of the Emperor," he murmured, "the Peacock would have saved us."

He took his grandson's hand, and the little crowd moved forward on to the mountainside.

For three hours they walked. The babies, bound on their mothers' backs, were sleeping long before they came through the birch woods. The younger children whispered together as the mysterious adventure gripped them. Men and women looked anxiously at each other as they neared the fringe of the landslide. Though a thin moon had risen and the sky was clear, it was difficult to see the cracks in the ground, some only wide enough to twist the unwary ankle, others large enough to swallow a man . . .

Chuan walked calmly on, holding Po-li's hand. Where the child went first across the broken places, the old man had grace to follow. With each step the village fell away into quiet shadow. Now and then a little whimper was heard, soon hushed in the wonder of the mountain night.

They came to the wide gap that had isolated the temple. If Kun-yi had his doubts, he didn't show them. He watched from the end of the file as Chuan scrambled down to a rock that had lodged crosswise.

"Let the boys and girls play the game of follow-my-leader," he called, knowing that where they trod blithely, seeing no danger, their parents would follow. Those first over sat resting on the grass, encouraging the more timid to come to them. Most of the men made several crossings, while the night mercifully hid what lay beneath.

At last, all were over. From there it was a short scramble among the ruins to the wall where the Peacock had disappeared. Chuan tugged his grandfather on, lifted a curtain of creepers, and showed the hidden stairway to the temple vaults.

Po-li drew back.

"Has offering of rice been made, Chuan?" he whispered.

"Why, yes, Grandfather!"

"And of meat?"

"Yes."

"And the offerings were accepted?"

"Both."

"And the suppliant bowed?"

"Flat down, Grandfather."

Po-li nodded, then groped his way down the steps.

The first flush of dawn on the mountain top found Kun-yi watching. He had not slept. With the aid of one battery torch and two rush-lights, he had seen his little band safely bedded down in the ruins, and had himself spent what remained of the night in thinking.

This dawn should have seen the start of the Spring Sowing, the age-old festival in which everyone had a part, as each had a share in the hope it offered. From such traditions could come the pointers to a better way of life. Only by their intelligent use could the tyranny of the old order and the terror of the new be alike avoided.

He recalled how, in the educational centres he had visited in Europe, he had come across the legend of Scylla and Charybdis, and of the captain who tried to steer through the currents between them, to protect his men from both evils. Kun-yi sympathised with that hero now.

On the one side he felt the insidious pull of ignorance and superstition, on the other the hot breath of militarism. Surely there must be a middle course!

If not? Then he, and thousands like him, in village school and provincial college, would chart one, pinpointing the dangers, and with example encouraging their little bands. And if on the voyage a familiar landmark of a Festival should emerge through the mists, he would be the first to hail it.

Now, it seemed, the landmark was not going to be visible. He polished his glasses and peered into the mist. Which would strike first, the new power or the old?

As if in answer to his thoughts, a wild scream echoed round the ruined pillars. Kun-yi controlled a sick feeling of panic, and inched himself on to the terrace, still heavy with dew and misty with little swirls of vapour.

Again and again echoed the scream, hoarse and menacing. It seemed to come from the edge of the cliff face. He crept forward and, bending low, looked over the chasm. As he did so, a rifle shot rang out, and a bullet ricocheted from the rock. Confident that he was not the target, Kun-yi peered over, and nearly fell. For, where the sun glinted on a ruined archway, he saw a majestic image of anger. A fantastic bird, red eyes and red beak agape, screeched in fury. Its huge tail, fanned open behind it, seemed part of the widening mist, and lent a ghostly aura to the menacing head. Even as Kun-yi gazed there were more shots, and bullets spattered up through the arc of angry feathers.

Kun-yi looked down to the defile. A Red Army sergeant and six soldiers crowded together on a narrow ledge.

"Shoot! Finish it!" came the angry order.

The soldiers seemed to hesitate and fumble with their rifles. One stepped forward with a few words, and made a deprecatory gesture in the direction of the ruins.

The sergeant pointed at him. "Shoot!"

For a moment again the man hesitated, then deliberately shot wide of the mark. The sergeant lifted his own rifle, and brought the butt down on the soldier's head. With a cry, the wretch tottered backwards, and plunged over the edge of the chasm.

Kun-yi saw the other five bunch together.

The sergeant, now as furious as the Peacock, singled out the nearest man.

"Shoot!"

The man lifted a wavering barrel.

"And hit!"

But again the new order had not reckoned with the old.

The white Peacock once more spread its mist of feathers, craned its long neck, uttered its weird wild call.

The man fell to his knees, his rifle went clattering down the ravine. Those behind him caught his panic, and grovelled as had their ancestors, in blind superstition.

The sergeant danced with rage. He raised menacing fists alike to his men and the Peacock, stamping his commando boots to prove the power of force; and the ground opened and swallowed him.

His men stared a moment; then, scrambling to their feet, fled in all directions into the mist . . .

Kun-yi laid his head on the wet turf.

The sun crept along the ruins of the temple, along the camomile lawn and the figure of Po-li kneeling at the steps. It warmed the thin back of the teacher, and reminded him of the spring.

He rose steadily to his feet.

"Come, Po-li," he said. "Rouse the people, and let them break fast. Today we start the Sowing."

The old man continued rocking to and fro on his knees. "The Peacock has saved us!" he chanted over and over. "The Peacock has saved us!"

Kun-yi put his hand on Po-li's shoulder.

"Or should one not say, Old Man, that it has destroyed the enemy, as it could have destroyed us! Rather give thanks that children are born with intelligence! That way lies our salvation!"

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PICK OF THE MOPS

It seems so hard of missus not to let me have any followers; there's such lots of young fellows in the town: and it's such a capable kitchen—there's such good dark corners in it—

MRS. GASKELL, *Cranford*

Mrs. Southern was too mild a name
For Dust's Arch-enemy,
Too mild a name
For such a bitterly-sweet activity.
There should have been more of the touch of the east wind in it.

For half a century this grey typhoon
Harried and hurried the girls if they tarried,
And worried and flurried them till they scurried along.
She was always,
She said,
Catching them at it,
Loitering as if there was nothing to do,
And laughing, too. She'd teach them
To laugh, she would.
It wasn't for the Likes of Them to laugh.

OSBERT SITWELL, *What Mrs. Southern Liked*

Straight Tip

It was customary for the servants to line up in the hall in a double row, like musketeers, and to extend their palms quite openly. The guest would be expected to disburse sums from left to right alternately as he headed for the door . . . From time to time guests rebelled. There is a tale of a diner who bought back his hat, sword, cane, and cloak, each from a different footman, but declined to accept his gloves, on the grounds that they were too old to be worth repurchasing. An acquaintance of Hanway's would shake each extended hand and enquire after the owner's health; another gave each servant an apple. An Army officer cut the silver buttons from his coat and distributed them . . . Guests

who were known to be opposed to paying vails would be neglected or insulted in various ways. That writer in *The World* said: "If I am bold enough to call for wine, after a delay . . . I receive a mixture of the whole sideboard in a greasy glass. If I hold up my plate, nobody sees me; so that I am forced to eat mutton with fish sauce and pickles with my apple pie." When they left the house, non-paying guests would find unpleasant objects in their pockets or discover that their carriage harness had been slashed.

E. S. TURNER, *What the Butler Saw*

Top People

I ride in my coach, and have nothing to do
And the country folks stare at me so;
And nobody dares to control me but you
Because I'm a lady, you know.
Then, servants are vulgar, and I am genteel;
So, really, 'tis out of the way
To think that I should not be better a deal
Than maids, and such people as they.

ANN TAYLOR, *The Vulgar Little Lady*

Charming Footman

"By all that is sacred I have never offered more than kissing."

"Kissing!" said the lady, with great discomposure of countenance, "do you call that no crime! Kissing, Joseph, is a prologue to a play. What would you think, Joseph, if I admitted you to kiss me!" Joseph replied that he would sooner die than have any such thought. "And yet, Joseph," returned she, "ladies have admitted their footmen to such familiarities; and footmen, I confess to you, much less deserving them; fellows without half your charms."

HENRY FIELDING, *Joseph Andrews*

Parlour Maid

I asked the maid in dulcet tone
To order me a buttered scone.
The silly girl has been and gone
And ordered me a buttered scone.

ANON

Cooks' Tour

And this new maid who looks so fresh and green,
On whom with all my woes I fain would lean;
Ah, lean upon her lightly, for who knows
How soon she will get up and quit the scene?

ANON, *Omar for Housewives*

Blotted Page

He appears to me to have lived in a hail of saucepan lids. His whole existence was a scuffle. This unlucky page, engaged in an evil hour at six pounds ten per annum, was a source of continual trouble to me. I watched him as he grew—and he grew like scarlet beans—with painful apprehensions of the time when he would begin to shave; even of the days when he would be bald or grey. I saw no prospect of getting rid of him. I never expected anything less than this unfortunate's manner of getting me out of my difficulty. He stole Dora's watch, which, like everything else belonging to us, had no particular place of its own; and, converting it into money, spent the produce (he was always a weak-minded boy) in incessantly riding up and down between London and Uxbridge outside the coach.

CHARLES DICKENS, *David Copperfield*

No Help

February 1667

Lay long in bed, talking with pleasure with my poor wife, how she used to make coal fires and wash my foul clothes with her own hand for me, poor wretch! in our little room at my Lord Sandwich's; for which I ought for ever to love and admire her, and do.

SAMUEL PEPYS, *Diary*

Call and I follow I follow!

by S. J. PERELMAN

FOR the casual visitor in London averse to ostentation and uncushioned by expense account, few hotels offer the advantages of Peacock's, in Clarges Street. Its rates are modest and its service amiable, its cuisine, by and large, free of the viscous sauces that agglutinate the English menu. The clientele, picturesque without being intrusive, consists in the main of dehydrated colonials with saffron faces, bishops in gaiters, and elderly spinsters who still cling to ruching and avian headgear.

For me the chief attraction of Peacock's is its proximity to the shops around Piccadilly and St. James's. After a tonic interval of caressing cardigans and chess sets in the Burlington Arcade, pricing wafer-thin diaries at Mudie's, and rubbering at the Golconda of neckwear and sponges, boots and guns, along Jermyn Street, I love to saunter home leisurely through the twilit Green Park, preening myself on my asceticism. By the time I reach the hotel, my frustration is such that I compensate with a Gargantuan tea of watercress sandwiches, rock buns, and pastry that utterly ruins my digestion. It makes for a stimulating afternoon.

One early evening during my last stay there, I approached the porter's desk brimful of euphoria and bile to discover a whole sheaf of messages awaiting me. The majority, while flattering, were hardly of paramount importance. Hooper's, the renowned coachbuilders, had rung up to advise that they could supply a Rolls-Royce sedan-de-ville as per my specifications, with built-in writing desk and poudoir—the exact duplicate of one furnished to His Arabic Highness the Sheik of Kuwait—for £9,250 nett. A firm of hairdressers in Bury Street wished to inform me that

its celebrated pomade, by appointment to the Duke of Rotherhithe, King Philip of Greece, and the Coldstream Guards, was available at three guineas the tin. Kittredge & Bolsover, Ltd., of Pall Mall, would be gratified to have me inspect their summer collection of canes, shooting-sticks, riding-crops, and whips. Should I require anything exotic in the last, they added, their special-order department was at my disposal.

The final message, though, had a distinct note of urgency. A woman I'll cheerfully call Mrs. Elaine Strangeways had phoned twice during the hour, identifying herself as an old friend and entreating me to ring her at Viburnum 3774 upon my return. The name awoke no immediate response, but the supplication, patently, was too crucial to ignore. Some poor soul—willowy, as I envisioned her, with ash-blonde hair and violet eyes—was desperately awaiting succour in, as I further visualised it, a negligee of crêpe de Chine. Vacillation, misanthropy in the circumstances was unthinkable. I instantly bolted upstairs to phone or, rather, as it turned out, to get lost in the Kafkalike network of passages surrounding my room.

When I ultimately found the door and forced it, I got an unexpected surprise. A strong whiff of curry assailed my nostrils, and I was confronted by a copper-coloured brigadier with tufted white eyebrows, straight out of the pages of *Chatterbox*, lacing himself into a corset. A second later, the scent of brimstone replaced that of curry, and I slunk off peppered by some of the most lurid cavalry oaths in my experience.

Slightly unnerved by the contretemps, I was not at concert pitch when I managed to get through to Viburnum 3774, and my voice may have sounded a trifle brusque. Mrs. Strangeways, in contrast, was excessively kittenish, determined, so it seemed, to tax me for my failure to recognise her. "You faithless man," she simpered. "Have you forgotten me so soon? You used to call me your Lily Maid of Astolat."

"I did?" I stammered, vainly racking my brain for a clue. It was a good thirty years since I had used language like that, and even then I had used it with diffidence. "When was that?"

"Why, in 1926," she said in plummiest tones. "Down at that divine little studio of yours on West Tenth Street. Don't you remember Elaine Abercorn, the tawny-haired goddess you were always writing poems to?" I did not recall myself in any bardic role, but her self-description was promising. "There was one you wrote about my eyes I still quote whenever I'm a bit squiffy. It went:

"Let me drown in the deeps of those luminous orbs
Where many a shipwrecked mariner lies—"

Crimson at the scope of my youthful ardour, I halted her in mid-dactyl. "Well, well—Elaine Abercorn, as I live and breathe!" I exclaimed. "How in the world did you know I was here?" Some movie quidnunc, it appeared, was her informant, and nothing must stand in the way of our instant reunion. "But, of course, my dear," I said, probing warily. "I'd be charmed to meet your—ah—husband some time—"

"You probably have already,"-she said frothily. "I've had four since I knew you." The present incumbent, a zoologist at Manchester University, was in Ostend that week, meeting a consignment of Belgian hares or some such jazz, and Elaine was patently avid for companionship. "Do let's have dinner tonight and chat over old times, shall we, lamb?" she begged. "Oh, I've thought about you *so* often over the years!"

I gallantly assured her that she, too, had never ceased to haunt me, and we arranged a rendezvous two hours thence, at a smart sea-food restaurant in Curzon Street. The problem of what to wear gave me pause; ordinarily, I prefer black tie for these sentimental occasions, as a cummerbund flattens the belly, but lacking one at the moment—the cummerbund, not the belly—I compromised on a waistcoat, and flicked a bath towel over my shoes.

The bar at Florio's was jammed when I arrived, and I spent a tempestuous half hour buffeted by theatregoers noisily downing triple whiskies and shellfish. Just as I was dispatching Elaine to the special purgatory reserved for old sweethearts, a giantess in an emerald-green frock trimmed with salmon beads, a veritable grenadier of a woman, wove through the crush and pinioned me. Askew on her head she wore a fawn-coloured duvetyn turban whose aigrette was secured by the Hope diamond or its rhinestone equivalent, and from the odour of malt pervading her embrace, I judged that she had fortified herself for our soirée.

"Dear boy, you haven't altered a whit!" she trilled. "Oh yes, you've lost most of your hair and gained a few stone, but I'd know you anywhere!" She cocked her head archly. "I'm changed, though, aren't I? Go ahead—say it."

"Elaine," I began fervently. "I give you my word of honour—" Luckily, I was saved from perjury by the barman's request for her pleasure—a champagne cocktail it proved, followed in lightning succession by two more. Elaine apologised; her constitution rebelled at anything but bubbly, and, moreover, she was completely spent from a Homeric day's shopping. Could she recount her purchases? I would be fascinated, I asserted, striking a pose like the physician in Sir Luke Fildes' Victorian masterpiece.

"Well," she said, signalling the barman for a refill, "every

time Nevil's abroad, I steal into Fortnum's and buy up all the tidbits he won't permit me. You know, potted shrimps, and Malaga grapes, and honey from Mount Hymettus—that sort of thing. Anyway, today I just went absolutely berserker. I bought three pounds of caviare, and a jar of those luscious Smyrna figs, and some greengage preserve, and a brandied plum pudding—" She levelled a demure glance at me from under her lashes. "You think I'm hopelessly extravagant, don't you?"

"Not at all," I disclaimed. "I'm sure zoologists do very well."

"Nevil?" she said with contempt. "Poor devil, he hasn't a bean—ours was a love match . . . Thank you, I will have another, but a touch more brandy. My dear," she breathed, enveloping my hand in her dinosaur paw, "it's angelic seeing you again. I can't wait for you to meet Nevil; he's the handsomest thing. People always mistake him for Rex Harrison."

I timidly observed that the same folk were wont to confuse me with Warren William, but Elaine was off on a nostalgic tack of her own. "I'll tell you something weird," she confided. "I met Nevil in this very restaurant, while I was still married to Hilary, my third husband. But what makes it so uncanny, Nevil was co-respondent when Hilary divorced me, just as Hilary was named by the man who preceded *him*."

"I—I say, oughtn't we to be considering food?" I blurted, overcome by dark premonitions. "We don't have to stay here necessarily—"

"But I want to," she pouted. "I adore this place, though, entre nous, darling, Nevil and I never come here any more—they're absolute robbers."

"Then why don't we—ahem—skip dinner, as it were?" I suggested brightly. "You probably aren't hungry anyhow, after noshing on all those sweets at Fortnum's."

My supposition, unhappily, was incorrect; with the emphatic avowal that she was famished, Elaine bore me in to the expectant brigands. Their eyes sparkled and their pencils flew as she proceeded to eviscerate my wallet—pâté, Whitstable oysters, a sole, filet mignon, and a favourite salad of the Nizam of Hyderabad made of shredded five-pound notes. Only cobwebs remained in the wine cellar when she had finished rifling it, and even the sommelier stood awe-stricken. Meanwhile, her effervescence soaring with the intake of champagne, my Lily Maid continued her marital saga.

"You never knew my first husband, did you?" she asked. "Benno Vontz, the sculptor—he used to hang around the Jumble Shop and all those bohemian spots you adored. He did

that hornbill in welded steel on top of Neiman-Marcus. A brilliant boy, but terribly erratic, and so jealous—he nearly drove me insane. For six years he kept spying on me and reading my mail everywhere we went—Woodstock, Santa Fé, Redondo Beach, even in Cuernavaca. I didn't have a moment's peace. He'd wake me up in the middle of the day and accuse me of affairs with all kinds of people, like osteopaths, carhops, bakers. I was practically on the verge of a breakdown when I met Ricky."

"What line was he in?" I murmured, making an irrevocable vow to join some Trappist order in the morning.

"He was an auctioneer," said Elaine. "One of those criminally goodlooking, virile types—you know, like Dean Martin or Robert Alda. I happened into his place on the boardwalk in Atlantic City, to appraise this ring some woman had given Benno. Well, it proved to be a fake, just carbon, and when I broke down and cried, Ricky bought me a drink to console me. He was so attentive and sweet I just couldn't resist confiding in him, and, of course, one thing led to another. One night, as we were driving home in a downpour, the brakes on his Cord overheated near Arverne and we had to take refuge in a motel. The next thing anybody knew, Benno and this awful private eye were all over us with cameras and flash bulbs. The little skunk had been following me for days; my dear, it was too sordid. Naturally, he named Ricky, along with all those chiropractors and bakers, though he didn't have a smidgen of proof."

The realisation that I was in the toils of a python far more lethal than any I had ever encountered in Malaya so constricted my throat that speech deserted me. "Wha—what happened then?" I croaked.

"Just what you'd expect," she said, scornfully draining her goblet. "Once the decree was final and we married, I got Ricky's measure subito. He was forever mousing around with some popsy, kiting cheques and flogging my jewellery until I was frantic. His mother finally crashed through with a few bob so we could come over here. That was when I met Hilary—"

"In this very restaurant, no doubt," I conjectured. Subtly avoiding the pressure of her knee, I moved to extricate myself from our banquette. "Forgive me a second, Elai—" I froze at the sudden expression of terror on her face. "What's the matter?"

"Over there—by the entrance," she said in a low, agitated voice. "Don't look now. It's Nevil. He—he must have got back from Ostend sooner than I thought . . . Oh lord, I can't imagine what he'll do when he finds me here with you."

For my own part, I could, and with blinding clarity. In a

flash, I foresaw the whole scene in glorious Technicolor—the confrontation, Elaine's hysteria, the mêlée as Nevil struck me on the bugle and drew claret, the constabulary's arrival in full fig. Then our visages spread across the Sunday newspapers, implemented by succulent detail and climaxing in a divorce whose outcome was predetermined: I should have to do the gentlemanly thing and espouse Elaine. The injustice of my plight, so bitter an expiation for an altruistic phone call, hit me like a blow in the solar plexus. As Holmes observed of his death grapple with Professor Moriarty at the Reichenbach Falls, so rapidly does the brain act that I believe I had thought all this out and managed to emit a bleat of self-pity before Elaine tugged my sleeve.

"Wait," she said uncertainly. "I'm not sure it's Nevil after all; I can never tell people apart without my contact lenses. Is he tall and sort of devil-may-care?"

I swivelled about and took a good look at the man. Far from resembling Rex Harrison, he was somewhat under five feet tall, had olive skin and glittering black eyes, and wore an Existentialist beard. While he was definitely serpentine, there was nothing about him either debonair or domestic. I exhaled slowly and arose. The time had come to sever, as delicately as possible, the Cupid's bowknot that had fettered my heart for three decades.

Gracefully excusing myself, I slipped out to the coatroom and had a quick tête-à-tête with the attendant—a rather appealing French girl, by the way, with a cameo profile and a willowy figure. Three minutes later, she approached our table with a message from my publisher enjoining me to meet him in Herzegovina at once. I pressed a fistful of notes on Elaine to square the check, kissed her hand in Bosnian free style, and made off down Curzon Street at the double. For the balance of my stay at Peacock's, I emerged only at night and ate exclusively in butteries . . . Oh yes, I emerged once by day to dine with a French person I know, but that's another story. And sufficiently droll, not that you could ever tempt me to tell it.

From S. J. Perelman's new book, "The Rising Gorge," published by Heinemann, copyright 1962

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THE CATALYST

Into a patch of moonlight
there moved a small clot of darkness

BY MARY TURNER

THEY started early, by their standards. When it was time for morning coffee they were in the desert and could find only a converted barn, where a searing brownish fluid was placed before them. It put Annabelle in a good mood.

"Extreme horror I can enjoy," she said. "It's the medium variety I can't stand."

Giles raised his cup a little way and put it down again. "Will all the weekend be like this?" he wondered. "Why are we doing it?"

"I admit you started it, darling, wanting to creep back into your childhood with this Henry man. I thought it might be entertaining to humour you."

"You shouldn't have. You should have saved me from myself. Good God, I've scarcely seen him since we left school, and I couldn't stand him there. He was so horribly friendly, nothing I could do ever stopped him being pleased to see me."

"You've learnt a thing or two since then, though," she said. "Anyway, a little absence from our usual haunts is appropriate, don't you think?"

A small may tree was growing outside the window. Against the formless snow of its blossom he saw the simple, unnaturally perfect shape of her head, outlined against innocence; innocence that must be hostile to his world, and Annabelle's. Thoughts that he scarcely recognised came to him out of the whiteness. He saw their shared life as a kind of corrupt perfection, the faith and truth of two people who offered nothing to the rest of the world except an easy obliquity. We are accomplices for life, he thought; so why should he feel a sadness, as though he had lost her already? She would never, he believed as he believed nothing else in existence, never take herself away from him.

Annabelle stood up. She was dressed for the country the way a model would be, floating exquisitely in front of a background of mud.

"Let's get on. Then we can be in time for lunch with sour

plums that Henry's wife bottled herself, out of the garden."

The great arterial roads have infected all the country that borders them with an urban sameness: graded, open, tidy as a map. Giles and Annabelle and their slick car were at home there; but not after: not arrowing into the little lanes where the wind shone over the long grass; not sliding between the close walls of the villages; not dipping into the hollows where the woods came heavy together across the light. "So mildewy," said Annabelle, "all these exaggerated trees."

It was difficult to find the house, which seemed to stand in a No-Man's-Land between villages. After making a number of futile inquiries, Giles could only conclude that Henry had not impressed his personality upon his neighbours.

"But look at the churches;" said Annabelle, "surely you said he was an architect to the Ecclesiastical Commissioners? He must run about architecting like mad; you'd think people would have noticed him."

"Henry, my dear one, is the most unnoticeable man. He's got as much character as a bit of used chewing-gum."

"You can make impressions on used chewing-gum. If you want to, that is. His wife may be a good managing woman with red arms," said Annabelle, distaste mingling in her tones with unwilling interest. "I simply can't wait to see them and get it over."

The lane they were following, arched with tall trees on high grassy banks, suddenly stopped being a lane and became a drive. A girl in a droopy cotton frock was hovering about the gate. Giles pulled up, ready to ask for some more garbled directions; but this time it wasn't necessary, because there was Henry, arriving in a fluster. This was Alison, and he did hope they'd had a good journey, such a lovely day, how nice to meet Annabelle at last, they'd been looking forward . . .

Giles and Alison shook hands. Alison blushed slowly from the neck up to the forehead as she struggled to produce a polite remark for these smart, these terrifying aliens. At last she said her piece. "You must be glad to get out of London in this lovely weather."

Annabelle's beautifully tended eyebrows gave a minute shrug as she politely replied, "Oh yes." She disliked leaving London as much as she despised weather chat, and it must be present to her mind that it was a financial heat-wave, not a meteorological one, that they were avoiding.

It was more than time for a drink, but first they must be ushered to their room. Henry insisted on carrying both suitcases, striking first himself and then Giles a paralysing blow in the

kneecap with their corners. "Come down as soon as you're ready," he cried, as he and Alison obstructed each other on the landing.

Annabelle went about the room in an ecstasy. "Isn't it *exactly* theirs? A jug and basin with pink cabbages, and oh Giles, a po-cupboard with squeaky hinges and a real po!" Each new horror delighted her more: the slippery rush mats, the tight unyielding beds, the dressing-table lurking in a corner where no light intruded. She frowned at the electric switch—"I rather hoped for candlesticks, or do you think a smelly paraffin lamp would match better?"—and at last brought herself to think of unpacking. "Find me a cupboard, darling."

"That's easy enough." There were cupboard doors of every shape, down too low, up too high, one with acres of dark mortary space and only one hook, one with lots of useless shelves and a smell of lavender.

"You haven't tried the one by the fireplace." The fireplace had, believe it or not, a red plush mantelpiece-cover with bobbles.

"I don't like this one."

"Giles, darling! Are you afraid something might come out at you?"

"Yes, I am," he said. "And anyway, what a relief, it won't open."

There was a tap at the door, about as loud as a mouse's tap.

"Is there anything you need?"

"Oh, Alison! Just in time. Will this cupboard open?"

He couldn't read her expression at all, though it pleased him to try; was it apology, sulkiness, or just indolence? "We don't opén that one. This one has a hanging-rail, here." He saw by Annabelle's face that it was another lavender one.

"Lunch is ready," said Alison, going in front of them with a backward glance. Her eyes were faintly green. As she walked her hands hung at her sides, knuckly child's hands.

They sat on very hard chairs, their feet on an old Turkey carpet whose cruel reds and blues had lost nothing in the process of fading. Giles saw with admiration that Annabelle was undaunted by discomfort, by brown soup, sweet sherry, and the expected sour bottled plums. She was absorbed in a delightful game, making an impression on old chewing-gum Henry.

"Your house is so utterly charming!" She indicated the squinny windows, dim in ecclesiastical-shaped arches. "Have you had it a long time?"

"We've lived here ever since we were married. But, you know, we don't feel we own the house; quite the reverse. It owns us, doesn't it, Alison?"

"Oh, yes."

"Alison and I feel that the house has *accepted* us, don't we, Alison?"

"Yes."

"And how exciting to be one's own architect! Do you plan all sorts of reconstructions?" asked Annabelle, keeping her lovely eyes fixed on Henry's pale pink face; perhaps rather than looking at the yellowish-brown woodwork set off by the mauvish-brown curtains.

Henry closed his lips primly on a lettuce leaf. "We couldn't alter anything."

"Oh no," said Alison.

"We have an idea—perhaps you may think it silly—"

"I'm sure not." Annabelle and Giles both looked splendidly sincere; they were good at it.

"—but we feel that everything here is in perfect harmony, including ourselves." He gave Alison a honeymoon smile. "Anything not in keeping might be, as it were, resented."

Alison spoke in her weak little voice. "We try to be very careful when we choose, well, furniture and—and things. Not to have anything different, you know."

"Yes, I can see that," said Annabelle, making it sound exactly as though she intended a compliment. "You know, this is the most out-of-this-world atmosphere—do tell me, would you say that the house was actually haunted?"

Henry bridled up as though someone had made a rather delightful indecent suggestion to him, but he only said, "Oh no, really, I'm sure Alison and I have never thought that."

Alison was passing Giles the sugar-basin. She didn't produce her usual confirmation of Henry's remark, but Giles felt her fingers, touching his, tremble finely for an instant. It was a shock; like touching stone and feeling it alive. She sat on her hard dining-room chair in a boneless curve, her fine hair a little untidy, the neck of her summer dress fitting all wrong round her thin neck and collarbones. Giles had an idea that she was quite empty, nothing in her head, nothing in her heart, no heat in her veins; only waiting. Bemused with boredom and horrid food, he wondered to himself, How long is waiting?

In the afternoon they were taken round the garden, invited by Henry to marvel at the enormous elms crowding upon its boundaries. They walked on moss cushions, beside a froth of cow-parsley flowers, all white and green lace. There had been flowerbeds once; you could still see their borders, half smothered, laid out in dog-toothed brick edging of regimented grey cobbles. Now the flowers of the wild had returned, and the cultivated

beauties had gone back to their rankly-growing ancestors, so that it was all tall, tangled, and rich, with the scent of growth, the scent of earth, the scent of savage things.

The sun shone in a faint blue sky with tiny clouds, and threw shafts of greened gold that strangely altered all their faces, playing hell with Annabelle's make-up, and turning Alison's cheeks to the chilled paleness of a Christmas rose. Now it was she who was at ease and they who were at a loss; their smart casual clothes too harsh and definite in the muted light, their voices too assured. Even Henry, trotting in his stuffy tweeds, was suitable to the surroundings as a woodlouse is when it trundles among dead leaves; but Alison, thought Giles, she could be chased by a satyr and turn into a willow tree this moment, before teatime, and we should all believe it. He thought of her in flight, lingering to glance backwards with those green eyes when a little haste could have saved her, so helpless, so inviting of her fate—

Henry said, "Good gracious, four o'clock already! Alison, dear, I'm sure we should all welcome a cup of tea," and they watched her go away from them across the bars of light and shade into the dark door of the house . . .

"I don't exactly care for going to bed at eleven p.m.," said Annabelle, putting her face into order for the night. "On the other hand, I couldn't have endured another moment of cosy chat downstairs. D'you know, I swear I can smell dry rot; d'you think it's got into my skin lotion?"

"Very likely. I quite agree, darling, Henry isn't just a bore, he's lethal."

"Oh, Henry," she said warmly, "I simply *love* Henry. I could listen to him uttering great clichés for ever. It's Alison."

"Surely," he said, "you can't mind her for not saying anything at all?"

"She's not human," said Annabelle. There was a silence full of the dead ends of unspoken thoughts. Then Annabelle said, "I shall take a huge sleeping-pill and get into this coffin-sized bed, and I hope I'll wake up about two days later."

Some time he woke out of a great distance of sleep into a moonlight room. He saw the crouching forms of the furniture, Annabelle asleep in the other bed, darkness thick in all the corners. He heard—but where?—the faintest sound, gone and then repeated again; a sound of sharp on rough. It was so small a sound to be so insistent, he hardly knew how it could have had him out of his bed, standing on a floor that felt like icy water to his bare feet, listening, feeling his way with sleep-numbed

fingers to the door of the cupboard, the cupboard that wouldn't open, beside the fireplace.

Uselessly he put out his hand to the door and the door came out to meet his hand. Out of the cupboard into a patch of moonlight there moved a small clot of darkness.

His heart struggled for one instant as it might struggle in the moment of dying, and than a ridiculous warm weakness ran gratefully through him as far as the soles of his feet. He whispered to himself, " It's the cat. Only the cat! "

It sat in the moonlight and washed its face, as a cat does that has had a tasty meal. It was only a small cat, striped golden and black, with a little white. Giles watched it, still swaying on his feet with sleep, and presently it rose and marched to the door. He let it secretly out, into the dark interior of the house; and in a moment he was back in bed.

He didn't sleep now. He lay and watched the moon travel; he walked again in slow thoughts through the shaded alleys of the garden, watching green light slide over pale skin. He saw folds of limp cotton print, too long, with a badly-cut neckline. His hand touched another, long-fingered, faintly reddened, and felt it tremble. The hours passed like water flowing, always the same, unmeasurable.

Annabelle, unlike Giles, woke up full of vigour and malice in the morning. He couldn't remember how long it was since she'd last eaten breakfast, let alone dressed, and at a table; but here she was having another go at fascinating Henry, and actually having a boiled egg. They all ate boiled eggs, runny, and kept warm in little knitted hats.

Yesterday's floating blue-and-white weather was gone. Giles could feel a dampness enfolding his skin between layers of heat and chill, and peering through the grudging windows he saw the sky suffused with a greyish pink like the underside of mushrooms. There was a throbbing, he thought, somewhere in the inner parts of his brain.

" Giles had the most absurd dream," Annabelle was saying. " He dreamed he heard a sound in the locked cupboard in our room."

Alison dropped her teaspoon into her saucer. It tinkled sharply against the background of noise which didn't seem after all to be inside Giles' head but somewhere near; perhaps just outside the room, a warm satisfied noise with a knock in it like a Diesel engine turning over slowly. " He tried the door, or at least he meant to, but it came open in the mad way things happen in dreams—"

For the first time since they arrived here, Alison raised her

head and looked straight at Giles. Her face was milky white, but the green of her eyes darkened like the surface of still water, breathed upon.

Annabelle went on "—and the dramatic climax was simply that your cat had been shut in there."

Henry patted his mouth with his napkin. "Quite letting the cat out of the bag," he said, "but of course it *was* a dream, because we haven't got a cat, you know."

"Perhaps a ghost cat," suggested Annabelle. "That would be much less hackneyed than all these grey ladies and horses without any heads. It's so unreasonable; why not purple ladies and horses with no tails?" And she smiled winningly at Henry, inviting him to be a bit whimsy just this once. The light thickened and grew more unreal, while outside the singing birds fell silent. A few enormous drops of rain thudded into the earth. Giles' head began to ache in a very small way.

By eleven o'clock there had been a grand Judgment Day thunderstorm; Henry had told them all about the plans of the new cathedral; Alison had made real coffee with grounds in it, and boiled-milk skin; and Giles was withdrawn into the enclosed world of a violent migraine. The room and everyone in it sailed over the waves of a choppy sea, and when he looked out of the window for escape, steel rods of rain beat straight on to his eyeballs. Nothing is more daunting than the prospect of telling a roomful of lusty people that you feel ill, and he might have sat there till he died if Henry hadn't pressed him to take another sweet biscuit, never mind your waistline for once!

"I've got a bit of a headache." The words had a lot of awkward corners he could hardly get round.

Henry was all solicitude. He ran about making Alison look for aspirins, and scolded her roguishly for not finding them. "We never need drugs here, you see—we don't lead your exciting life."

Alison went on looking hopelessly under the neat papers in the desk, in the vases on the mantelpiece.

They were killing him; with their voices, their tramping feet, their dizzy weaving to and fro. And then Annabelle saved him, not out of pitifulness, but because she was herself; Annabelle couldn't do with illness, even of a minor description. She'd get you a doctor, if you needed one, or an ambulance or an undertaker, but the little bedside attentions were not for her.

"Just let him quite alone and he'll sleep it off," she said. "Look, the rain's stopping—we can all go out and leave him in peace."

He went upstairs on feet that were miles away from his head,

his great enormous opening-and-shutting head. He could hear them fencing about which car and who to drive, he could imagine the stuffy mackintoshes, the sort of pseudo-deerstalker hat that Henry would wear against the rain, the arguments about the best pub. A vast forlornness beset him as he let himself feebly down on the bed; and then the bright pain in his head attenuated and darkened into blackness and sleep.

First there was a healing stretch of nothingness. Then there was the dream. The dark door stood wide open in the wall and the cat sat there, but grown, filling the frame with its splendid stripes, the great white ruff of its neck. The pupils of its golden eyes were shrunken to slits in the noonday light; they watched, mad lamps of desire, for him to move, to actuate the springing muscles, to change repose into a delight of fury. It purred and purred; and then he was awake, and the purring was a little tapping on the door.

She'd got a cup of tea on a silly bamboo tray with a cloth embroidered in daisy-stitch.

"I thought perhaps you'd like something now—if you feel better?"

She fiddled around trying to put it down on the bedside table which was already full of books and pills and Annabelle's bottles of luxury. Certainly he felt better. He felt strong and beastly and invincible.

"I dreamed about your non-existent cat again," he said. The cupboard door was shut and bland-faced. Purposely he didn't help her with the tray. "Where are they, Henry and Annabelle? Where did you go?"

"Oh, they're not back. I didn't go. I mean, I had a lot to do."

"So you stayed; and brought me tea."

"I do hope it's not too strong." It looked as weak as washing-up water. "Well," she said, hovering, "I must go now . . ."

"And do what?"

She just looked at him as if she hadn't heard properly.

"Are you going to make rose-leaves into jam? Or weave nettles into shirts for swans? You look frightened; are you frightened? I think perhaps you ought to be, you know."

Slowly he put out his hand, took her narrow wrist into his fingers, felt the little bones slide over one another under the skin. He still thought she would pull away from him and go; everything would be the same as before, nothing would have happened.

She said, "Oh no," and moved towards him.

And now he knew how it is that the Cat is possessed with love

for its victim, how the claws caress deeply and more deeply, how tenderly the beast offers escape so that once and again it can enjoy the pursuit and the seizing. And he was the victim too; he sensed in himself the hideous delight of surrender and despair, so that all the pleasure he'd ever known seemed in memory as white and tasteless as milk. And then, as if no time had passed, the shadows were longer in golden afternoon light, and she sat up, tidying her hair with inexpert fingers, glancing back at him and away with her greenish eyes, carrying off her damned silly tray without a word.

He lay there loathing her, despising her, knowing that he could never stop longing for her; and certain that he'd already gone from her thoughts like the morning's thunderstorm. She'd left him with a scummy cup of cold tea and a taste of dead ashes.

He heard Henry and Annabelle returning. "And how's our invalid?" Henry inquired.

"He woke up," said Alison. "And he had a nice cup of tea." Her voice was as flat and as boring as it ever was.

"Splendid! Nothing like a cup of tea. And Annabelle and I have had a most enjoyable trip; too bad you didn't come, dearest. It's quite fresh after the rain; I expect we shall all be glad of a cosy evening round the fire."

Giles lay still. In a moment his wife would come up, and he'd look at her and see only a stranger. In the quietness of the terrible haunted room he could hear a sound of purring; vast, satisfied, singing of the blue steel of tiger-claws and the bloodied fangs.

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GUESTS ARE SO FINICKY

I can't bear a hand like a fish in the night
That comes feeling over my face;
Or a nun in the cupboard—it doesn't seem right,
Or a strangulee hanging in space.

Or to wake being lathered by somebody dead—
I fear for the sharp coup de grâce;
Or a shrouded-up shuffling shape by the bed,
Or a penny-eyed ghoul in the glass.

I don't mind the room through the door at the end
Of the passage (I say to my host),
I don't mind the damp or the lamp you can't mend,
But I will *not* "put up" with your ghost.

J. A. LINDON

WONDER-BOY JENKYNS

by

E. L. MALPASS

WARM-HEARTED and friendly, as you please, Polly Jenkyns was. A bit too warm-hearted and friendly, some might say. For by the time she was twenty-four, she was the mother of five.

A fruitful vine, Polly, and no mistake.

And then, one April sunset, when the sky was as fresh and clean as a sheet on the line, and Venus burnt like a candle above the etched treetops, Polly went up on the downs to smell the breeze. There, among the darkling gorse, she met a stranger . . .

Little Idwal was born at the turn of the year. Wish you could have seen that boy. A beautiful child, strong and well developed. Walking in no time, and damn near running when most children are still getting around on knees and elbows.

Six years old he was when our Festival Queen was crowned. Oh, there was a great day in Dinas! The massed choirs of all the chapels singing in the market place, a procession of carnival bands, with the Co-op milk van got up to represent Industry Hand In Hand with Progress, sports for the schoolchildren in the afternoon, and dancing and fireworks in the evening. Worse than Sodom and Gomorrah, everyone said, lips pursed; but very enjoyable none the less.

Let us, however, concentrate on the school sports.

There is a pretty scene for you, with the ladies in their gay frocks; and the blazers of the gentlemen; and the little girls, all ribbons and laces, and the little boys all sunburn and grins. There are the sideshows and the produce stalls. There is Mr. Pugh, very fierce with his starting pistol; and Foxy Williams, busy with the stop-watch his wife has bought him for his birthday, timing everything from the opening speeches to the Open Mile. There is Megan the Mixed Infants, surrounded by her chirruping

brood, struggling manfully to get them all facing the same way for the impending egg-and-spoon race. There is Polly Jenkyns, with little Confucius, her penultimate. Pretty as paint is Polly, smiling at everyone, good-natured as the sunshine, as motherly as mother earth. Yes, a pretty scene. And the smell of the trampled grass, and the talk, and the laughter. And the summer wind, dancing in the summer trees . . .

"One to be ready, two to be steady, three to be—*off*," squeaks Megan the Mixed Infants.

Confusion! It soon becomes obvious that, in not a few of the contestants' minds, the basic principles of an egg-and-spoon race are but ill-defined. Some stand, gazing as though hypnotised at their eggs. Others hurry off in all directions. Little Gwladys Parry bursts into tears. Only one Mixed Infant, in fact, knows where he is going—and he goes, like an arrow from the bow.

To say that Idwal Jenkyns won that egg-and-spoon race would be the understatement of the year. He was breasting the tape before any of his fellow competitors had even realised there was a tape to breast.

Pugh the Starting Pistol found Williams the Stop-watch looking very worried. Shaking his timepiece. Holding it to his ear. "Watch gone wrong already, is it?" Pugh inquired cheerfully. Daggers drawn, those two, Mr. Pugh being full back to the Dinas Panthers, and Williams scrum half to the Llangrwl Hottentots.

Bridled, did Foxy Williams. "Right as rain, my watch is. But the Infant Jenkyns has accomplished the fifty yards egg-and-spoon in four seconds flat."

Sceptical, Mr. Pugh looked. "Eight seconds for the hundred yards, in fact. No, Foxy. Impossible, it is."

"Went like greased lightning, all the same," said Mr. Williams, very dogged.

Mr. Pugh stroked his handlebar moustache. "Must be your timepiece, Foxy," he said at last, his mind made up.

"Nonsense," snapped Mr. Williams. But he was shaken. Pleased as Punch he had been with his new watch. And now—playing tricks already it was.

And his worst fears were confirmed when he timed the hundred yards under ten. According to his watch, the winner reached the tape in 8·4 seconds. Very disgruntled, Foxy Williams was. Shook his timepiece savagely. Then, suddenly, realised that the winner was the Infant Jenkyns.

He went up to the child. "Would you run the hundred yards for me again, Idwal?" he asked silkily.

"Yes, sir," Idwal said, very polite. (And say what you like

about that Polly Jenkyns. Might be a bit haphazard about bringing them into the world; but once in, she saw to it that they behaved proper, and no nonsense.)

So Mr. Williams took little Idwal to the starting-post. "Off you go, boy," he said.

8·6 seconds, this time. Tiring, the boy was.

Mr. Pugh came back from a visit to the produce stalls, a bright yellow melon under his arm. "Well, Foxy, still establishing world records?"

"Yes," Williams said tersely. "8·6 seconds for the hundred yards."

"Let *me* try," said Pugh. He borrowed the watch. They unleashed Idwal once more. 8·7 seconds this time. "He can certainly travel," Pugh admitted. He went halfway up the course. "Again," he cried.

Idwal came towards him like a greyhound. "Here, boy," cried Mr. Pugh, and flung the melon. The Infant Jenkyns caught it without a moment's hesitation, tucked it under his arm, and finished the course in 8·7 seconds. Pugh hurried back to the starting-post. Almost he embraced his old enemy.

"What a wing three-quarter," he cried. "The Panthers will be unbeatable."

Very sour, Mr. Williams looked. "The Panthers? Not playing for that rabble, this boy. A Hottentot he will be, for sure."

"A Hottentot?" Mr. Pugh sounded pained. "Listen, boy. This infant will be a player of style. Be a pity to waste his talents on a gang of hoodlums like the Hottentots."

"Hoodlums?" Lost for words, Foxy Williams was, an unusual situation for a Welshman to find himself in. "We shall see," he said lamely.

"We shall indeed," said Pugh.

Ten years on, now. Mr. Williams foxier than ever. Streaks of grey in Pugh's handlebar moustache. Their mutual rancour unabated. Idwal Jenkyns leading the Dinas Grammar School XV to unprecedented victories. Little Gwladys Parry no longer a tearful Mixed Infant, but grown up into a sweet, shy, darkhaired sixth former; worshipping, from afar, the heroic Idwal.

Not that Idwal thought himself heroic. A pleasant, amiable lad, anxious to please, tall and good-looking.

But very difficult he found it to please everyone. "Be turning out for the Hottentots soon, is it, good boy?" Foxy would ask.

"Very well, Mr. Williams," Idwal would say politely.

But then there was Mr. Pugh. "Have you playing for Dinas Panthers next season," he would say with a hearty back slap.

"Yes, Mr. Pugh," Idwal would say obediently. And very worried he would become, wondering how he was going to play for both teams at once.

But not one to leave things to chance, that Foxy Williams. Introduced Idwal to his niece, Blodwen, who was all white teeth and bosom, and who cut up the lemons for the Hottentots at half-time. A staunch supporter, was Blodwen. Partisan in the extreme. If, Foxy reasoned, you fell in love with Blodwen, then you were a Hottentot for life. She wouldn't let you be anything else.

And fall in love with Blodwen Idwal did. Hook, line, and sinker, poor fool. And it was as they walked home, hand in hand, from the school dance, that he looked down at her lovely face and knew that what he wanted more than anything in the world was to kiss that exquisite mouth. He stood still. Clumsily he pulled her towards him. She gazed up, and the young moon danced in her eyes. But then she turned away her face. "Playing for the Hottentots on Saturday, is it, Idwal?" she asked dreamily.

"Yes, indeed," said Idwal, who an hour ago had assured Mr. Pugh he would play for the Panthers.

She looked up. "I shall be there, on the touchline," she whispered. And now she took him in her arms. "Dear, dear, Idwal," she murmured.

So Idwal played for the Hottentots, who defeated the Panthers by fifty-four points to nil.

Livid, Mr. Pugh was. Round to Polly Jenkyns' house post haste. "I want to see Idwal," he began, bursting into the kitchen.

Sitting by the fire, Polly was. And opposite her a big redfaced gentleman. "Why, Mr. Pugh," cried Polly, friendly as you please. "Not at home, Idwal is. But let me introduce you to his da."

The stranger nodded.

"His—what?" asked Pugh nonplussed.

"Idwal's da. Read about Idwal's exploits in the newspapers, he did, and came home hotfoot." She held out her left hand. "Made an honest woman of me, too."

"Congratulations, I am sure," Pugh said coldly. He turned to the stranger. "Hoping I am that you will use your parental influence to persuade your son to play for the Panthers. A fine team, if I may say so."

"No money in rugby, boy," Idwal's da said firmly. "Just

been trying him out with the round ball, I have. Goes like the wind. Sign him up for Dinas Rovers before long, I shouldn't wonder."

Shocked and distressed beyond measure, Pugh was. "Dinas Rovers?" he cried. "Over my dead body."

"As his father," the stranger said pompously, "I suppose I am entitled to some say in the lad's upbringing."

Then in came Idwal. "Evening, Da," he said pleasantly. "Evening, Mr. Pugh."

Pugh said in a terrible voice, "What is this I hear, Idwal? Playing soccer, is it?"

"And very enjoyable, too, sir. I find the round ball less unpredictable."

Shuddered, did Mr. Pugh. He went and sought out his old enemy. "Oh, there is terrible," he cried. "Jenkyns' da has turned up." He swallowed. "Seducing him to soccer, he is."

Never would you have thought that anything could bring Messrs. Pugh and Williams together. But this did. Rugby is something above mere local loyalties. "Fight him tooth and nail, I will," said Foxy.

"To the death," agreed Pugh.

Never got a moment's peace, now, did Idwal. His da rigged up a floodlight in the back yard, and the boy was out every evening practising goal kicks and dribbling. Showing his paces to the Dinas Rovers selectors on Saturday morning. Tearing up and down the rugger field every Saturday afternoon under the unrelenting gaze of Blodwen. More than flesh and blood could stand, it was. Even Idwal's gentle nature began to rebel. And then the day came when his da said proudly, "Playing for Dinas Rovers on Saturday, you are. And a nice fat contract, all ready for signing."

Sank, did Idwal's heart. "But I am playing for the Hottentots. Promised Blodwen, I have."

"Then you can damn well unpromise Blodwen," his da said, very unfeeling.

Miserably, Idwal went to see his beloved. "Shan't be playing on Saturday, Blodwen bach. Signed me up for Dinas Rovers, my da has."

Oh, very hoity-toity, that girl. "Go and play your old soccer, then. Plenty of good rugger players to look after a girl like me."

"But, my love—" pleaded Idwal.

"Go," cried Blodwen, proud eyes flashing. Hell hath no fury like a female rugby supporter scorned by a devotee of the no-handling code. . .

Saturday dinnertime.

Idwal, tense and pale, a prey to conflicting loyalties. His da, equipped with rattle and rosette, waiting for the taxi to take them to the Rovers' ground. A knocking on the door. Mr. Pugh and Mr. Williams on the mat, very stern and unbending. "Come to take you to the match, boy."

"What match?" cried Idwal's da, very belligerent.

They eyed his rattle. They winced. "Come, Idwal," commanded Mr. Pugh.

"Stay, Idwal," ordered his father.

Torn, the boy was. He said bravely, "Not unmindful I am of my filial duty. Nor yet of that to my old schoolmasters. Go for a short walk I will and cogitate."

"No need to cogitate," roared his da. "Signed up you are for the Rovers, all square and above board, by damn."

Idwal said nothing. He went out into the street to make his difficult decision. A pretty day it was. Above the rooftops he saw the tip of Dinas Mountain, fresh and green in the cold, clean winter sunshine. Be nice up there, he thought wistfully. He heard footsteps. Gwladys Parry, tripping up the street, gazing at him with love and devotion. "What you doing out here, Idwal?" she asked shyly.

"Cogitating," he said miserably. He fell in step beside her. They walked on. Very restful, she was. The streets fell away. They began to climb. Soon they were on the hillside, alone with the joyous larks. Down in the valley a whistle blew. For a moment Idwal's conscience reared its ugly head. But not for long. "They can keep their old football," he said. And their old Blodwen, he added to himself as he watched the sun and the wind playing in Gwladys' hair.

"A nasty, rough game," said Gwladys. "Never could I love a man who played football."

Idwal was filled with a sudden peace. Something he had not known for a long time. He took her hand. "Could you love a man who *didn't* play football?" he asked.

She smiled up at him, shy no longer. "If his name was Idwal Jenkyns, I could," she murmured softly.

Oh, beautiful it was on the mountain, with new love dawning in Idwal's mind like the warm sunlight of a May morning. Beautiful on the mountain, far away from the blood baths and mayhem taking place in the valley.

Well, what a waste of talent, you may say. Don't need to be a world record breaker to kiss a girl in the lonely hills.

But there it is. No getting away from that old human nature, is there, however fast you can run.

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Loves Labours Won

Shall we resolve to woo these girls of France?
And winne them too . . .

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Who shall have my fair lady?
Who but I, who but I, who but I?
Under the leavès green!

ANON

In an Apple Tree

In a moment he had swung himself up beside me, and with one arm around my waist had me pinned against the trunk. The branch cracked most ominously.

" Get down at once—the branch will not hold us both," I said.

" It will if you keep still," he told me.

One false move would have seen us both upon the ground, some ten feet below, but to remain still meant that I must continue to lie crushed against his chest, with his arm about me, and his face not six inches away from mine . . .

" The moment is opportune to teach you Spanish," he murmured.

" I have no wish to learn it," I answered.

Then he laughed, and, taking my face in his hands, he kissed me very suddenly, which, being a novelty to me, and strangely pleasant, rendered me, for a few moments, incapable of speech or action.

DAPHNE DU MAURIER, *The King's General*

Put your head, darling, darling, darling,
Your darling black head my heart above:
O mouth of honey, with thyme for fragrance,
Who, with heart in breast, could deny you love?

O many and many a young girl for me is pining,
Letting her locks of gold to the cold wind free,
For me, the foremost of our gay young fellows;
But I'd leave a hundred, pure love, for thee!

Then put your head, darling, darling, darling,
Your darling black head my heart above;
O mouth of honey, with thyme for fragrance,
Who, with heart in breast, could deny you love?

SAMUEL FERGUSON, *Cean Dubh Deelish*

In a Tent

When they were all asleep and she was sure they would not call she came in. I loved to take her hair down, and she sat on the bed and kept very still, except suddenly she would dip down to kiss me while I was doing it, and I would take out the pins and lay them on the sheet and it would be loose and I would watch her while she kept very still and then take out the last two pins, and it would all come down and she would drop her head and we would both be inside of it, and it was the feeling of inside a tent or behind a falls.

She had wonderfully beautiful hair and I would lie sometimes and watch her twisting it up in the light that came in the open door, and it shone even in the night as water shines sometimes just before it is really daylight. She had a lovely face and body and lovely smooth skin too. We would be lying together and I would touch her cheeks and her forehead and under her eyes and her chin and throat with the tips of my fingers and say, " Smooth as piano keys."

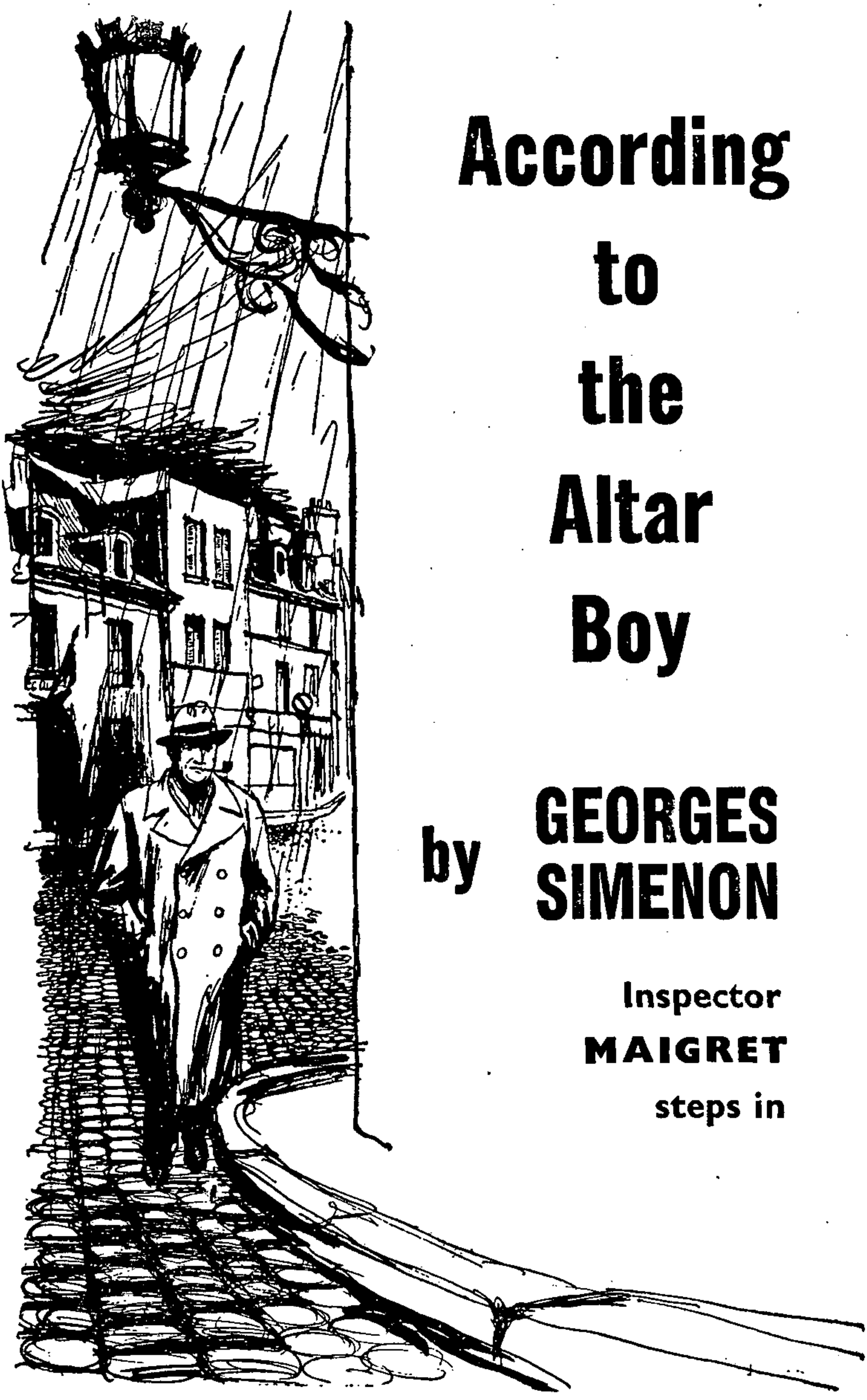
ERNEST HEMINGWAY, *A Farewell to Arms*

So Deep in Love

So fair art thou, my bonnie lass,
So deep in love am I:
And I will love thee still, my dear,
Till a' the seas gang dry.

Till a' the seas gang dry, my dear,
And the rocks melt wi' the sun:
And I will love thee still, my dear,
While the sands o' life shall run.

ROBERT BURNS,
My Love is Like a Red Red Rose



According to the Altar Boy

by **GEORGES SIMENON**

Inspector **MAIGRET** steps in

A FINE, cold drizzle was falling, and it was dark. The only light was towards the end of the street, near the barracks, where at half past five the trumpets had sounded, and now you could hear the noise of horses being taken to be watered. There the dimly-lit rectangle of a window could be seen: someone getting up early, or perhaps a sick person who had been awake all night.

The rest of the street was asleep. A wide, quiet street, newish with houses all much the same, one- or at the most two-storeyed, such as are found in the suburbs of most big provincial towns.

The whole district was new, devoid of mystery; its inhabitants were quiet and unassuming: employees, commercial travellers, people of limited means, peaceable widows.

Maigret, coat-collar turned up, stood pressed into the corner of the entrance to the boys' school; he was waiting, watch in hand and smoking his pipe.

At a quarter to six precisely,

the bells of the parish church rang out behind him, and he knew it was, as the boy had said, the " first stroke " of the six o'clock Mass.

The chimes were still reverberating in the damp air when he heard, or rather sensed, the jarring outburst of an alarm clock in the house opposite. It lasted only a few seconds. In the dark the child's hand must already have stretched out from the warmth of his bed and gropingly turned off the alarm. A few seconds later the attic window on the second floor lit up.

It was happening exactly as the boy had said. He was the first to get up, noiselessly, in the still-sleeping house. Now he must be throwing on his clothes, his socks, splashing water on his face and hands, running a comb through his hair. As for his shoes, he had stated, " I carry them downstairs, and put them on on the bottom step in order not to wake my parents."

It had been the same every day, winter and summer, for almost two years, since Justin had started as altar-boy at the six o'clock Mass at the hospital.

He had also told them: " The hospital clock is always three or four minutes behind the parish church."

And the Chief Inspector had proof of this. The day before, at the flying squad to which he had been assigned for some months, his inspectors had shrugged their shoulders at these detailed stories of bells and first strokes and second strokes. But Maigret, perhaps because he, too, had served as altar-boy for a long time, had not found them laughable.

The parish bells first, at a quarter to six. Then Justin's alarm clock in the attic where he slept. Then, after a few minutes' interval, the higher-pitched, more silvery chimes of the hospital chapel, which made one think of convent bells.

Maigret was still holding his watch in his hand. The child took only just a little more than four minutes to dress. His light went out. He must have been groping his way downstairs, still trying not to wake his parents. Sitting down on the bottom step and putting on his shoes, taking his coat and cap from the bamboo hatstand that stood on the right in the passage.

The door opened. The youngster closed it without a sound, looked anxiously up and down the street, then saw the bulky silhouette of the Inspector approaching.

" I was afraid you wouldn't be there," the boy said. And he started off, walking fast. He was a little fellow of twelve, fair, thin, already self-willed.

" You want me to do just the same as the other days, don't you? I always walk quickly. At first it was to see how many minutes it would take me, and then in winter, when it's dark, I'm afraid. In a month from now, at this time, it'll begin to get light."

He took the first street on the right, another quiet street, rather shorter, which opened out on a square planted round with elm trees and crossed diagonally by tramlines.

Maigret noticed minute details that brought back his own

childhood. First, the youngster kept out from the houses as he walked, no doubt because he was afraid someone might step out of the shadow of a doorway. Then, to cross the square, he kept clear of the trees in the same way, for a man could have been hiding behind them.

In fact, he was a pretty brave little chap, as, for two winters, in all weathers, sometimes in thick fog or moonless dark, he had been going along the same route every morning all alone.

"When we get to the middle of the rue Sainte-Catherine," the boy said, "you'll hear the second stroke of the Mass from the parish church."

"What time does the first tram go past?"

"Six o'clock. I've only seen it two or three times when I was late. Once my alarm didn't go off. Another time I went back to sleep. That's why I always jump out of bed when it goes off."

A wan little face in the rainy darkness, eyes that still retained some of the stupor of sleep, a thoughtful expression with only the slightest hint of fear.

"I shan't go on serving at Mass. It's only because you insisted that I came today . . ."

They turned left on to the rue Sainte-Catherine where, as in all the other streets in the district, there was a lamp every fifty yards or so. Each throwing a pool of light. Between these the child unconsciously walked more quickly than when he was crossing each reassuring circle of lamplight.

The distant noises of the barracks could still be heard. Lights were coming on in some of the windows. Someone was walking somewhere in a cross street; no doubt a man on his way to work.

"When you got to the corner of the street, you didn't see anything?"

That was the critical point, for the rue Sainte-Catherine was quite straight and deserted. With the pavements straight as a die and streetlamps at regular intervals, there was not enough shadow between them for one to miss seeing, even at a hundred yards, two men having a row.

"Perhaps I wasn't looking where I was going. I was talking to myself, I remember. I often do in the morning when I'm going this way, talk away to myself under my breath . . . I wanted to ask my mother something when I got home, and I was repeating to myself what I was going to say to her."

"What did you want to say to her?"

"For a long time I've wanted a bike. I've already saved up three hundred francs out of what I get for the Masses."

It may have been just an impression, but it seemed to Maigret that the child was keeping farther out from the houses. He even stepped off the pavement, then got on to it a little farther on.

"Here it is. Listen—that's the second stroke chiming at the parish church . . ."

Meanwhile Maigret was trying, quite unconscious of the

absurdity, to penetrate into that world that was the boy's world each morning.

"I must have raised my head. You know, like when one is running without looking and one finds oneself up against a wall... It was right at this spot." He pointed to the line on the pavement that separated the shadow from the light of a streetlamp, in which the fine rain was dancing like luminous dust.

"First I noticed there was a man stretched out, and he seemed so big that I'd have sworn he took up the whole width of the pavement."

That was impossible, for the pavement was about eight feet wide.

"I don't know what I did exactly. I must have swerved out of the way. I didn't run off right away, because I saw the knife in his chest, with a thick brown horn handle—I noticed it because my Uncle Henri has a knife almost the same and he told me it was stag's horn. I'm sure the man was dead."

"Why?"

"I don't know. He looked dead."

"His eyes were closed?"

"I didn't notice his eyes. I don't know any more. But I had a feeling he was dead. It all happened very quickly, as I told you yesterday in your office. But I had to repeat the same things so many times all day yesterday that I'm mixed up. Especially when I feel no one believes me."

"And the other man?"

"When I looked up I saw there was someone a little farther on, perhaps fifteen feet or so away. Someone with very bright eyes. He looked at me for a second, and started to run. It was the murderer."

"How d'you know?"

"Because he ran off as fast as he could."

"Which direction?"

"Straight down there."

"Towards the barracks, in fact?"

"Yes."

It was true that Justin had been questioned at least ten times the previous day. Before Maigret's arrival at the office, the inspectors had even made a sort of game of it. But not once had the boy changed the smallest detail.

"What did you do?"

"I started to run, too. It's difficult to explain... I think it was when I saw the man running away that I felt frightened. And then I ran as fast as I could..."

"In the opposite direction?"

"Yes."

"You didn't think of calling for help?"

"No. I was too scared. Most of all I was afraid my legs would suddenly give out, for I couldn't feel them any longer. I ran back as far as the place du Congrès. I took the other street. It also leads to the hospital, but the long way round."

" Let's go on."

Bells again, high-pitched bells, the chapel ones. After another fifty yards or so there was a crossroads, and on the left were the loopholed walls of the barracks, on the right a vast, dimly-lit doorway, surmounted by the greenish dial of a clock.

It was three minutes to six.

" I'm a minute late. Yesterday, in spite of everything I got here on time because I ran."

In the middle of the oak door there was a heavy knocker, which the boy raised. The din echoed through the porch. A slippered porter came to open up, let Justin through and placed himself in Maigret's path, looking at him with suspicion. " What is it? "

" Police."

" You've got your identification? "

You crossed a porch, where the first hospital odours greeted you; then, through a second door, you found yourself in a vast courtyard full of outbuildings. Far away in the shadows, you could make out the white headdresses of the nuns on their way to the chapel.

" Why didn't you say anything to the porter yesterday? "

" I don't know. I was hurrying to get there."

Maigret could understand that. For the boy it wasn't the lodge with its distrustful, grumpy porter that was a haven, nor this cold courtyard where stretchers were borne silently past. It was the warm sacristy, near the chapel, where one of the sisters was lighting the altar candles.

There were two poles, in fact, for the boy each morning and he went from one to the other in a dizzy rush—his room under the roof, from which the ringing of the alarm clock dragged him, and, at the other end of a sort of void filled only with the chimes of the bells, the sacristy of the chapel.

" You're coming in with me? "

" Yes."

Justin seemed put out, or rather shocked, no doubt at the idea of this Inspector, who was perhaps an unbeliever, penetrating into his sacred world. Maigret could understand now why the child had the courage to get up so early every morning and overcome his fears.

The chapel was warm and cosy. Already the patients in their grey-blue uniforms, some with their heads bandaged, some with their arms in slings, some on crutches, were lined up on the seats in the nave. In the gallery the sisters formed up like a uniform troupe, and all the white coifs dipped at the same time in mystic reverence.

" Follow me."

They had to go up a few steps, pass near the altar, where the candles were already burning. On the right there was a dark-panelled sacristy, a tall bony priest who was finishing putting on his vestments, a lace-trimmed surplice that was ready for the boy, and a nun busy filling the altar vessels.

It was only at this point, the day before, that Justin, panting, his

throat dry and his legs shaky, had come to a halt. It was here he had cried: "A man has just been killed in the rue Sainte-Catherine."

A small clock set into the panelling showed six o'clock exactly. Bells were ringing again; they were less distinct inside than out. Justin said to the nun who was helping him with his surplice, "It's the police inspector."

Maigret stood there while the child, preceding the chaplain, shook out the folds of his red cassock and hurried towards the altar steps.

The vestry nun had said, "Justin is a good little boy. Very devout. He has never told us a lie. Sometimes he hasn't turned up to serve the Mass. He could have pretended he was sick. But no, he admitted quite openly that he couldn't bear to get up because it was too cold, or because he had had nightmares during the night and was feeling tired out."

And the chaplain, Mass over, had looked at the Inspector with eyes as bright as those of a stained-glass saint, and said, "Why should you think this child would make up such a story?"

Maigret knew now what had happened in the hospital chapel. How Justin's teeth had chattered and how, at the end of his tether, he had a fit of hysterics. Mass mustn't be held up, so the sacristy nun warned the Sister Superior, and took the place of the child, who meanwhile was being fussed over in the vestry.

It was ten minutes before the Sister Superior thought of informing the police. She had to go through the chapel. Everybody felt something was afoot. At the local headquarters the duty sergeant could not understand.

"What? Sister superior? Superior to what?"

So she repeated gently in her convent voice that a crime had been committed in the rue Sainte-Catherine. And the police had found nothing, neither victim nor, of course, murderer . . .

As he did every day, Justin had gone to school at half past eight as if nothing had happened, and he was in class when Inspector Besson, a chunky little man who looked like a boxer and played the tough guy, had come for him at half past nine, when the report had reached the flying squad.

Poor boy, for two hours in a gloomy office that reeked of pipe-smoke and the stove that didn't draw, he had been questioned, not as a witness but like a suspect. One after the other, three inspectors, Besson, Thiberge, and Vallin, had tried to catch him out, to make him waver in his story.

And then, for good measure, his mother had followed the child. She waited in the anteroom, crying and sniffing by turn and telling everyone, "We're honest people; we've never had any trouble with the police."

Maigret, who had been working late the night before on a narcotics case, hadn't arrived in his office until around eleven.

"What's this?" he had asked on seeing the boy, dry-eyed, and

looking with his skinny legs for all the world like an indignant little cock.

" A brat who's trying to take a rise out of us . . . He says he saw a corpse in the street—he even saw the murderer who ran away at his approach. But a tram passed along the same street four minutes later and the driver saw nothing. The street is a quiet one, and nobody heard anything. Furthermore when the police were called, a quarter of an hour later, by some nun or other, there was absolutely nothing on the pavement, not the least speck of blood."

" Come into my office, son."

Maigret was the first person who had spoken civilly to Justin that morning. The first to treat him like a grown-up and not like some brat with a vicious imagination.

Maigret had made him repeat his story, simply and quietly, without interrupting and without taking notes.

" You're going to go on serving Mass at the hospital? "

" No. I never want to go there again. I'm too scared."

But it was a heavy sacrifice. The child was certainly devout, he certainly responded to the poetry of early Mass in the warm, rather mysterious atmosphere of the chapel. And, besides, he was paid for these Masses, not much, but enough to let him put aside a little nest egg. And he did so long to have the bicycle his parents couldn't afford to give him.

" I'm going to ask you to go there once again. Only once. Tomorrow morning."

" I wouldn't dare to walk that way."

" I'll come with you. I'll wait for you in front of your house. And you'll do exactly the same as all the other times . . ."

And that was how Maigret had found himself all alone at seven in the morning at the hospital entrance, in a district that the day before he knew only from having passed through by tram or by car.

An icy drizzle was still falling from the sky, which was now a watery green. Eventually it soaked into the Inspector's coat, and he sneezed twice. There were several people passing by, coat-collars turned up and hands in pockets; at the butchers' and grocers' the shutters were being opened.

It was the most ordinary, peaceful district you could possibly imagine. Only with the greatest difficulty could you conceive of two men, even two drunks, having a row at five or six in the morning on the pavement of the rue Sainte-Catherine. It was about as difficult to accept that a tramp or some no-good or other could have attacked an early passer-by in order to rob him, and might have stabbed him.

But, then there was the sequel. According to the boy's statement, at his approach the murderer had run off, and it had then been five to six. Now, at six, the first tram went by, and the driver stated he had seen nothing. Of course, he could have had his attention distracted, could have been looking in the opposite direction.

But at five past six, two police constables who were coming off

their beat had walked along that very same pavement. And they had seen nothing.

At seven or eight minutes past six, a cavalry officer who lived three houses away from the spot Justin had pointed out had left home as he did every morning to go to the barracks. He hadn't seen anything, either.

Finally, at six-twenty, the constables who had cycled from the district police station had equally found no trace of the victim.

Had someone come meanwhile and removed the body in a car or van? Soberly and without any fuss, Maigret had set out to envisage all the possibilities, and this one had turned out to be as false as the others. There was a sick woman at number 42 in the street, and her husband had been up with her all night. He was quite positive.

" We can hear all the noises from outside. I was paying special attention as my wife, who is in great pain, is upset by the slightest noise. Wait a moment . . . It was the tram that woke her, just as she had dropped off. I can tell you that no car went past before seven that morning. The first thing to go by was the dustcart."

" And you heard nothing else? "

" There was a sound of running at one point . . ."

" Before the tram? "

" Yes, for my wife was sleeping. I was getting myself a cup of coffee."

" One person running? "

" More like two."

" You don't know in which direction? "

" The blind was down. As it makes a noise when you pull it up, I didn't look out . . ."

That was the only evidence in support of Justin's story.

There was a bridge about two hundred yards away, and the constable on duty had not seen any car passing. One would have to suppose that only a few minutes after running away the murderer had come back, heaved his victim on to his shoulders, and carted him off heaven knows where—and all without attracting any attention.

There was worse to come. There was evidence that made people shrug off the child's story. The place he had pointed out was situated just across from 61. Inspector Thiberge had called there the day before, and Maigret, who left nothing to chance, was now ringing there in his turn.

It was a newish house of red brick, with three steps up to the varnished pitch-pine door on which a polished brass letterbox shone. It was only a quarter past seven, but from what he had heard, the Inspector knew he could safely present himself at that hour.

A withered old woman, with a hairy upper lip, first opened a spyhole in the door and parleyed with him before letting him into a hall fragrant with the aroma of freshly-made coffee. " I'll find out if the Judge will see you."

The house was occupied by a retired member of the judiciary,

who was said to have a private income; he lived there alone with his servant.

There was a sound of whispering in the front room, which would normally have been the drawing-room. Then the old woman came out, and said spitefully, "Come in, but wipe your feet, please. This isn't a stable."

It wasn't a drawing-room—it wasn't like anything one normally imagines. The room, which was fairly large, was something of a bedroom, study, library, and even attic, for it was heaped with the most unexpected objects.

"You're coming to look for the corpse?" a voice sneered, and made the Inspector start.

As there was a bed in the room he had quite naturally looked in that direction, but it was empty. The voice came from the corner of the fireplace, where a thin old man was sunk in the depths of an armchair, a rug around his legs.

"Take your coat off. I love heat, and you won't be able to stand it for long in here."

That was so. The old man, who had a pair of tongs within reach, was doing his best to produce the biggest blaze possible from a log fire.

"I thought that, since my day, the police had made some progress and had learnt to distrust the evidence of children. Children and young girls, they're the most dangerous witnesses, and when I was a Judge . . ."

He was wearing a thick dressing-gown, and, despite the temperature in the room, around his neck there was a scarf as wide as a shawl.

"So it was right opposite my house that the crime is supposed to have been committed, eh? And you, if I'm not mistaken, are the famous Inspector Maigret, whom they've been good enough to send to our town to reorganise the flying squad?" His voice grated. He was a nasty old man, aggressive and full of savage irony.

"Well, my dear Inspector, unless you accuse me of being in league with the murderer, I regret to inform you, as I already told your colleague yesterday, you're on the wrong track.

"As you've no doubt been told, old men need very little sleep. And there are some people who manage with very little all their lives. That was the case with Erasmus, for instance, and also with a gentleman known by the name of Voltaire . . ." His glance moved complacently to the library shelves stacked up to the ceiling with books.

"I could quote you many other cases you would know equally little about. But, to be brief, it is so in my own case. I pride myself on not having slept more than three hours a night in the last fifteen years. As for the last ten, my legs have refused to support me and, in any case, I have no curiosity about the places where they could take me, I spend my days and my nights in this room, which, as you can see, looks straight out on to the street.

"From four in the morning I sit in this chair, wide awake,

believe me. I could show you the book in which I was immersed this morning, but as it's a Greek philosopher I suppose that wouldn't interest you. However, if any event of the order described by your over-imaginative boy had taken place beneath my window, I can assure you I would have noticed it. My legs may have failed, as I told you, but my hearing is as good as ever.

" Besides, I am still curious enough by nature to take an interest in all that happens in the street, and if it amuses you I can tell at what time every housewife in the neighbourhood passes my window on her way to the shops."

He looked at Maigret with a triumphant smile.

" So you're accustomed to hear young Justin going past? " the Inspector asked with saintly sweetness.

" Naturally."

" Hear and see him? "

" I don't understand."

" For more than half the year—for almost two-thirds, it's light at six in the morning. And the child served at Mass in summer as well as winter."

" I used to see him pass."

" Seeing that it was a case of such a regular daily occurrence, like the first tram, you must have been expecting it."

" What do you mean? "

" For example, when a factory hooter in the neighbourhood goes off every day at the same time, or when a person passes by your window as regular as clockwork, you naturally say to yourself, ' There, it's such-and-such a time.' If one day the hooter doesn't sound, you say to yourself, ' It must be Sunday.' If the person doesn't go past, you wonder, ' What can have happened to him? Is he ill? ' "

The Judge's alert, treacherous eyes were watching Maigret narrowly. He gave the impression of resenting Maigret's lecture.

" I know all that," he muttered, cracking his finger-joints. " I was a Judge before you joined the force."

" When the altar-boy went past—"

" I heard him, if that's what you want to make me admit! "

" And if he didn't go past? "

" I could happen to notice it. But I could also happen not to notice it. As in the case of the hooter you were speaking of just now: one is not struck by the absence of the hooter every Sunday."

" And yesterday? " Maigret might have been mistaken but he had the impression that the old Judge scowled: there was in his look something sulky, something fiercely shut in. But then old people often sulk just like children, and sometimes show the same childish stubbornness.

" Yesterday? "

" Yes, yesterday." There was no reason for repeating the question except to give himself more time.

" I didn't notice anything."

" You didn't notice if he passed? "

"No."

"Or if he didn't pass?"

"No." Still the same frank and seemingly triumphant "No."

"No tramping of feet, no thud of a falling body, no gasping?"

"Nothing at all."

"Thank you."

"Pray don't mention it."

"Seeing that you were a magistrate, I obviously need not ask if you are ready to repeat your evidence under oath?"

"Whenever you want me to." And the old man said that with a sort of gleeful impatience.

"I must apologise for having disturbed you, sir."

"And I wish you success in your inquiries, Inspector."

The old servant must have been standing outside the door, for she was right on the spot on the threshold to show the Inspector out and close the door behind him.

Maigret had a strange feeling as he stepped out again into the everyday life of that calm suburban street, where the housewives were beginning to make their way to the shops and children could be seen going to school. It seemed to him that he had just been hoaxed, and yet the Judge had not been lying—except for one omission. He had the impression, too, that at one point he had been on the verge of discovering something very odd, very subtle, and very unexpected; at that moment it would have taken only a little effort to bring it off, but he had been incapable of making it.

In his mind's eye he saw the boy again; he saw the old man again. He tried to see some connection between the two.

He stood on the edge of the pavement, slowly filling his pipe. Then as he had not yet had breakfast, not even a cup of coffee on getting up, and his drenched overcoat was clinging to his shoulders, he went to the corner of the place du Congrès and waited for a tram to take him back.

The mass of sheets and blankets heaved like a sea swell, an arm emerged, a red face appeared, shining with sweat; then a surly voice grumbled out, "Pass me the thermometer."

Madame Maigret was sitting sewing by the window where she had drawn back the lace curtain to be able to see despite the twilight; she rose with a sigh and switched on the light. "I thought you were asleep. It's not half an hour since you took your temperature."

Resigned, knowing from experience that it was useless to thwart her great bear of a husband, she shook the thermometer to bring down the mercury, then slid it between his lips. He found time to ask, "Nobody's come?"

"You should know, as you haven't been asleep."

He must have dropped off, however, even if it was only for a few minutes. It was that wretched carillon that kept dragging him out of his torpor and bringing him to the surface again.

It wasn't their own home. As his assignment in this provincial town was to last about six months, and as Madame Maigret could

not bear the thought of her husband eating in restaurants for such a long period, she had gone with him, and they had rented a furnished flat in the centre of the town.

It was too bright for their liking with its floral wallpapers and bargain-basement furniture, and the bed that groaned under the Inspector's weight. But at least they had chosen a quiet street where, as the landlady, Madame Danse, said, not even a cat went by.

What the landlady hadn't said was that, the ground floor being occupied by a dairy, a stale smell of cheese hung about the whole house. Nor had she mentioned—and Maigret had just found out, for it was the first time he had spent the day in bed there—that the door of the dairy below was fitted not with a bell of the usual kind but with a strange apparatus of metal tubes that slowly jangled out a carillon each time a customer entered.

"How much?"

"38.5."

"A little while ago it was 38.8."

"It'll be more than 39 tonight."

He was furious. He was always bad-tempered when he was ill, and he glowered at Madame Maigret with deep resentment for she insisted on not going out just when he would have loved to have a smoke.

It was still raining, still the same fine rain that streaked the windows, falling silently, drearily down, and giving one the feeling of being in an aquarium. The electric-light bulb, hanging unshaded at the end of its flex, gave out a harsh light. You could picture street upon street, equally empty, where the windows lit up one after the other, and people went to and fro in their cages like fish in a bowl.

"You're going to have another cup of herb tea."

That would be about the tenth since midday, and he would have to sweat out all that tepid water into his sheets, turning them in the long run into a damp compress.

He must have caught this chill or cold while he was waiting for the boy in the cold morning rain on the school doorstep, or perhaps later while he was roaming round the street. He had hardly got back at ten o'clock to his office at the flying squad headquarters or embarked on his normal ritual of poking the stove when he started to shiver. Then he felt too hot. His eyelids began to sting, and when he looked into the scrap of mirror in the cloakroom, he saw his eyes were swollen and moist.

Besides, his pipe didn't taste the same, and that was always a sure sign.

"Look here, Besson, if by chance I don't come in this afternoon, you'll go on with the inquiries on this affair of the altar-boy."

And Besson, who always thought he knew better than anyone else, said, "You really think, Chief, that there *is* anything there that a good hiding wouldn't put a stop to?"

"All the same you'll have the rue Sainte-Catherine watched by one of your colleagues—by Vallin, for instance . . ."

" In case the corpse comes back to lie down in front of the Judge's house? "

The start of his chill left Maigret too much under the weather to rise to that. He continued heavily giving instructions. " Give me a list of all the people living in the street. As it isn't a very long one, that won't be too much work."

" Shall I question the boy again? "

" No."

From then on he had been feverish; he could feel the drops of sweat break out on his skin one after the other; he had a stale taste in his mouth, and he kept longing to sink into sleep, but, when he did, it was only to hear immediately the ridiculous carillon of the brass tubes in the dairy.

He hated being ill because it humiliated him and also because Madame Maigret kept a fierce watch on him to prevent him smoking his pipe. If only there had been something she should go and buy at the chemist's! But she had taken care to bring a full medicine chest with her from home.

He hated being ill, and yet there were moments when it was almost voluptuous, moments when, on closing his eyes, his years dropped away and he relived his childhood sensations. Then there would come before him the face of young Justin, pale and strong for his years. All that morning's images returned to his memory, no longer with the precision of everyday reality, no longer in the dry light of things that one sees, but with the peculiar intensity of things that one feels.

For instance, he could have described in almost every detail that attic room he had not been in—the iron bed no doubt, the alarm on the bedside table, the child stretching out his hand, dressing noiselessly, with every gesture the same as always . . .

The same as always—that was it. That seemed to him important as evidence, as truth. When for two years at a fixed time one serves at Mass, one's actions become as it were absolutely automatic.

The first chimes at a quarter to six . . . the alarm . . . the higher-pitched chapel bells . . . the shoes at the bottom of the stairs, and the door opening on the cold breath of the morning town.

" You know, Madame Maigret, he's never read a detective story." Ever since they had once done so as a joke they had called each other Maigret and Madame Maigret, and now they had almost forgotten that they had first names like everyone else.

" He doesn't read the papers either . . ."

" You should try to get to sleep."

With a last look at his pipe, lying on the black marble of the mantelpiece, he closed his eyes.

" I questioned his mother for a long time. She's a good woman, but far too easily upset by the police . . ."

" Go to sleep."

He was silent for a little while. His breathing became louder, as if he was about to drop off. " She asserted he'd never seen a corpse. That's something one avoids showing children . . ."

"What's that to do with it?"

"He told me the corpse was so big it seemed to span the pavement. That's exactly the impression you do get from a dead body on the ground. A dead body always looks bigger than a living man. You understand?"

"I don't see why you are worrying about it. Besson's taking care of all that."

"Besson doesn't believe in it."

"In what?"

"In the dead man."

"Would you like me to turn off the light?"

Despite his protests, she got up on a chair and put some oiled paper round the bulb in order to lessen the glare.

"Try to sleep for an hour, and then I'll give you a fresh cup of herb tea. You're not sweating enough."

"D'you think if I just took a puff or two at my pipe . . .?"

"Are you mad?"

She went into the kitchen to take a look at the vegetable broth; he could hear her padding about. All the time in front of his eyes he saw the same stretch of the rue Sainte-Catherine, with street-lamps every fifty yards.

"The Judge claims he didn't hear anything . . ."

"What are you saying?"

"I bet you they loathe each other . . ."

"Who are you talking about?" Her voice came from the other end of the kitchen. "Can't you see I'm busy?"

"The Judge and the altar-boy . . . They've never spoken to each other, but I bet you anything they loathe each other. You know, very old people, especially those who live alone, come to be just like children. Justin went by every morning, and every morning the old Judge was there by the window. He looks like a screech-owl . . ."

"I don't know what you méan."

She stood there framed in the doorway, a steaming ladle in her hand.

"Try to follow. The Judge claims he didn't hear anything, and it's too serious for me to suspect him of lying."

"I should hope so! Try not to think about it any more."

"Only, he doesn't dare to say that he did or didn't hear Justin go by yesterday morning."

"Perhaps he fell asleep again."

"No . . . He doesn't dare to lie, so he is deliberately vague about it. But the husband in number 42, who was sitting up with his sick wife, heard running in the street."

He kept coming back to that. Sharpened by the fever, his thoughts went round in circles.

"But what could have happened to the corpse?" Madame Maigret's objection showed all the sound sense of a middle-aged woman. "Anyway, don't think about that any more. Besson knows his job—you've often said so yourself."

Discouraged, he sank under the blankets, and tried hard to fall asleep, but it wasn't long before he was thinking again of the altar-boy, his legs white against the black socks.

"There's something wrong . . ."

"What're you saying? Something wrong? You feel worse? You want me to call the doctor?"

No. He was starting from zero all over again, obstinately. He was setting out again from the entry of the boys' school, crossing the place du Congrès. "There! It's here something goes wrong . . ."

First because the Judge hadn't heard anything. Unless one were to accuse him of giving false testimony, it was difficult to accept that there could have been a fight under his window, a few feet away, that a man could have started running in the direction of the barracks, while the altar-boy rushed off in the other direction.

"I say, Madame Maigret . . ."

"What is it now?"

"Suppose they both ran off in the same direction?"

Madame Maigret sighed, picked up her sewing, and settled down dutifully to listen to this monologue interspersed with the hoarse breathing of her husband.

"For one thing, it's more logical . . ."

"What's more logical?"

"That they should both run off in the same direction. But, in this case, it was not in the direction of the barracks."

"You mean the boy chased the murderer?"

"No. It's the murderer who would have chased the boy."

"What for, as he didn't kill him?"

"To make him keep quiet, for instance."

"But he didn't manage, as the child has told his story."

"Or to prevent him saying something, giving away some detail. Listen, Madame Maigret . . ."

"What do you want?"

"I know you'll start by refusing, but it's absolutely essential. Pass me my pipe and my tobacco. Just a few puffs. I have the impression that I'm on the point of understanding—that in a few minutes, if I don't lose the thread . . ."

She went over for the pipe on the mantelpiece; with a sigh of resignation she held it out to him. "I knew you'd find a good excuse. Anyway, this evening, whether you like it or not, I'm going to make you a plaster."

As luck would have it, the telephone had not been installed in the flat. You had to go down to the dairy where the instrument was behind the counter.

"You are going to go downstairs, Madame Maigret, and you will call Besson. It's seven o'clock; maybe he's still at the office. If not, call the Café du Centre; he'll be playing billiards there with Thiberge."

"I'm to ask him to come round?"

"To bring me over as quickly as possible not the list of everybody who lives in the street, but a list of the tenants of the houses

on the left-hand side, and only between the place du Congrès and the Judge's house."

"Try at least not to get uncovered . . ."

She had hardly started going downstairs when he got himself out of bed, hurried barefoot to his tobacco pouch to fill another pipe, then lay down again all innocence in the bed.

Through the thin floorboards he could hear a voice murmuring, the voice of Madame Maigret at the telephone. He smoked with relish, in little greedy puffs, although his throat was very sore. In front of him raindrops slid slowly down the black windowpanes, and that reminded him afresh of his young days and the childhood illnesses when his mother brought him caramel custard in bed.

Madame Maigret came up again, puffing a little, glanced round the room to see if anything was wrong, but didn't think of the pipe.

"He'll be here in about an hour."

"I must ask you to do something else, Madame Maigret. You must get dressed . . ." She gave him a suspicious look. "You will go to young Justin's house, and you will ask his parents' permission to bring him to me. Be nice to him. If I sent one of the inspectors, he would be sure to frighten him, and the boy's already too inclined to stiffen up. You will simply tell him that I would like to chat with him for a few minutes."

"And if his mother wants to come with him?"

"Get out of it as best you can. I don't want the mother."

He was all alone, hot, sweaty, deep down in the bed, with his pipe sticking out from the bedclothes and emitting a light cloud of smoke. When he closed his eyes, he kept seeing the corner of the rue Sainte-Catherine; he was no longer Maigret the Chief Inspector —he was the altar-boy, hurrying along, going the same way every morning at the same time, speaking to himself under his breath to keep up his courage.

He turned the corner of the rue Sainte-Catherine . . .

"Mother, I would like you to buy me a bike . . ." The boy was practising the speech he would make to his mother when he got home from the hospital. But it must have been more complex than that. The child would surely think up some more subtle approaches.

"You know, Mother, if I had a bike, I could . . ."

Or perhaps: "I've already saved up three hundred francs. If you would lend me the rest—I promise to pay it back out of the money I get for the Masses—I could . . ."

The corner of the rue Sainte-Catherine . . . A few moments before the parish church bells sound the second stroke . . . and there was only another hundred and fifty metres of black, empty street to go in order to touch the reassuring door of the hospital . . . A few strides between the pools of light from the streetlamps.

And later the boy would say, "I looked up, and I saw . . ."

The whole problem was there. The Judge lived almost exactly halfway up the street, equidistant from the place du Congrès and the barracks corner, and he had neither seen nor heard anything.

The sick woman's husband, the man at 42, lived nearer the place du Congrès, on the right side of the street, and he had heard the hurrying footsteps of a man running.

Yet, five minutes later, there was neither corpse nor wounded man on the pavement. And neither car nor van had passed. The constable on duty at the bridge, the other policemen in the district, who were on their beats at different places, none of them had seen anything unusual, like, for example, a man carrying another on his back.

His temperature must have been rising, but Maigret no longer thought of consulting the thermometer. It was just like his childhood: when he was ill, it seemed to him that his mother, leaning over him, seemed so big that she filled the house.

There was this body lying across the pavement, so big because it was dead, with a brown-handled knife in its chest.

And behind it a man standing a few yards away, a man with very bright eyes, who had started to run . . .

To run in the direction of the barracks, while Justin took to his heels, and fled in the opposite direction.

"There!"

There what? Maigret had said the word aloud as if it contained the solution to the problem—as if it *were* the solution to the problem. He was smiling with satisfaction as he drew on his pipe in voluptuous little puffs.

Drunks are like that. Truths suddenly become evident to them which they are incapable of explaining and which fade away as soon as they sober up.

It was there there was something false! And, in his fever, it was exactly at the point that Maigret located the jarring detail.

"Justin didn't make it up . . ."

His fear, his panic, when he had arrived at the hospital weren't put on. Nor had he made up the body that looked too long lying on the pavement. And there was at least one person in the street who had heard running.

What was it, then, that the sneering Judge had said? "Are you still pinning your faith on the evidence of children?"

At all events, something of the sort. Yet it was the Judge who was wrong. Children are incapable of creating a story out of nothing, because truths are not built out of nothing—there must be some basis. Children distort the facts, perhaps, but they do not invent them.

There! Again that satisfied "there" that Maigret repeated at each stage, as if congratulating himself . . .

There had been a corpse on the pavement . . .

And, doubtless, there had been a man nearby. He might even have had bright eyes.

And someone had run away.

And the old Judge, Maigret would have sworn, was not the man to lie in so many words.

He was hot. He was drenched; nevertheless, he emerged from

the sheets to go and fill a last pipe before Madame Maigret returned. While he was up he took the opportunity of opening the cupboard and taking a large gulp from a bottle of rum. Too bad if his temperature did rise a little that night, but everything would be tied up.

And it would be a very pretty piece of work—an anything but orthodox inquiry conducted while tucked up in his bed. That was something Madame Maigret would be quite incapable of appreciating.

The Judge hadn't lied, and yet he must have done his utmost to have a dig at the boy he hated, as two children of the same age can hate one another.

The customers were getting fewer downstairs, for the preposterous door chimes were ringing less often. No doubt the dairyman, his wife, and their daughter, pink as a ham, were at dinner in the back shop.

Footsteps on the pavement. Coming up the stairs. Stumbling footsteps, like a child's. Madame Maigret opened the door and pushed young Justin in in front of her, his thick navy-blue woollen jacket sparkling with little pearls of rain. He smelled like a wet dog.

" Wait a minute, sonnie, I'll take off your jacket."

" I can do it myself."

Another suspicious look from Madame Maigret. Obviously, she could not believe that this was still the same pipe. She may even have suspected the swig of rum.

" Sit down, Justin," said the Inspector, pointing to a chair.

" Thanks. I'm not tired."

" I've had you brought here to have a friendly little chat. What were you busy at? "

" My arithmetic homework."

" So in spite of what you've been through, you've been to school? "

" Why shouldn't I have gone? "

He was a proud little fellow.

He had drawn himself up again to his full height. Perhaps, the Inspector, too, lying there in bed, seemed to him to be bigger and longer?

" Madame Maigret, be so kind as to go and take a look at the broth in the kitchen and close the door."

This done, he winked in the boy's direction.

" Pass me my tobacco pouch. It's on the mantelpiece. And the pipe that should be in my overcoat pocket. Yes, the one hanging behind the door. Thank you, son. Were you frightened when my wife came to fetch you? "

" No." And he said it with pride.

" Have things been difficult for you? "

" Only because everyone keeps saying I'm making it up."

" And you aren't making it up, are you? "

" There was a dead man on the pavement and another who—"

" Hush! "

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" What? "

" Not so fast. Sit down."

" I'm not tired."

" You've already said so, but it makes *me* tired to watch you standing up."

He sat down on the chair, right on the edge, and his feet didn't touch the ground. His legs swung and his knees stuck out bare between his short trousers and his socks.

" What prank have you played on the Judge? "

A rapid instinctive reaction. " I've never done anything to him."

" You know which Judge I'm talking about? "

" The one who's always at his window. He looks like an owl."

" I should hâve said a screech-owl. What's been going on between you? "

" I've never spoken to him."

" What's been going on between you? "

" In winter I never saw him, because his curtains were drawn when I passed."

" But in summer? "

" I put out my tongue at him."

" Why? "

" Because he looked at me as if he was laughing at me; he would start sniggering to himself while he watched me."

" You've often put out your tongue at him? "

" Every time I saw him."

" And he? "

" He'd give a nasty laugh. I thought it was because I served at Mass and because he was an unbeliever."

" So it was he who was lying."

" What did he say? "

" That nothing happened outside his house yesterday morning because he would have noticed."

The lad stared intently at Maigret, then lowered his head.

" He was lying, wasn't he? "

" There was a corpse with a knife in its chest on the pavement."

" I know."

" How do you know? "

" I know, because it's true," said Maigret softly. " Pass me the matches. I've let my pipe go out."

" Are you too hot? "

" It's nothing. A chill."

" You caught it this morning? "

" That's possible. Sit down."

He pricked his ears, and called, "Madame Maigret! Would you go downstairs. I think that's Besson who's just arrived and I don't want him to come up till I've finished. You keep him company downstairs. My friend Justin will call you."

He said once more to his young companion, " Sit down. It's true, too, that you both ran away."

" I told you it was true."

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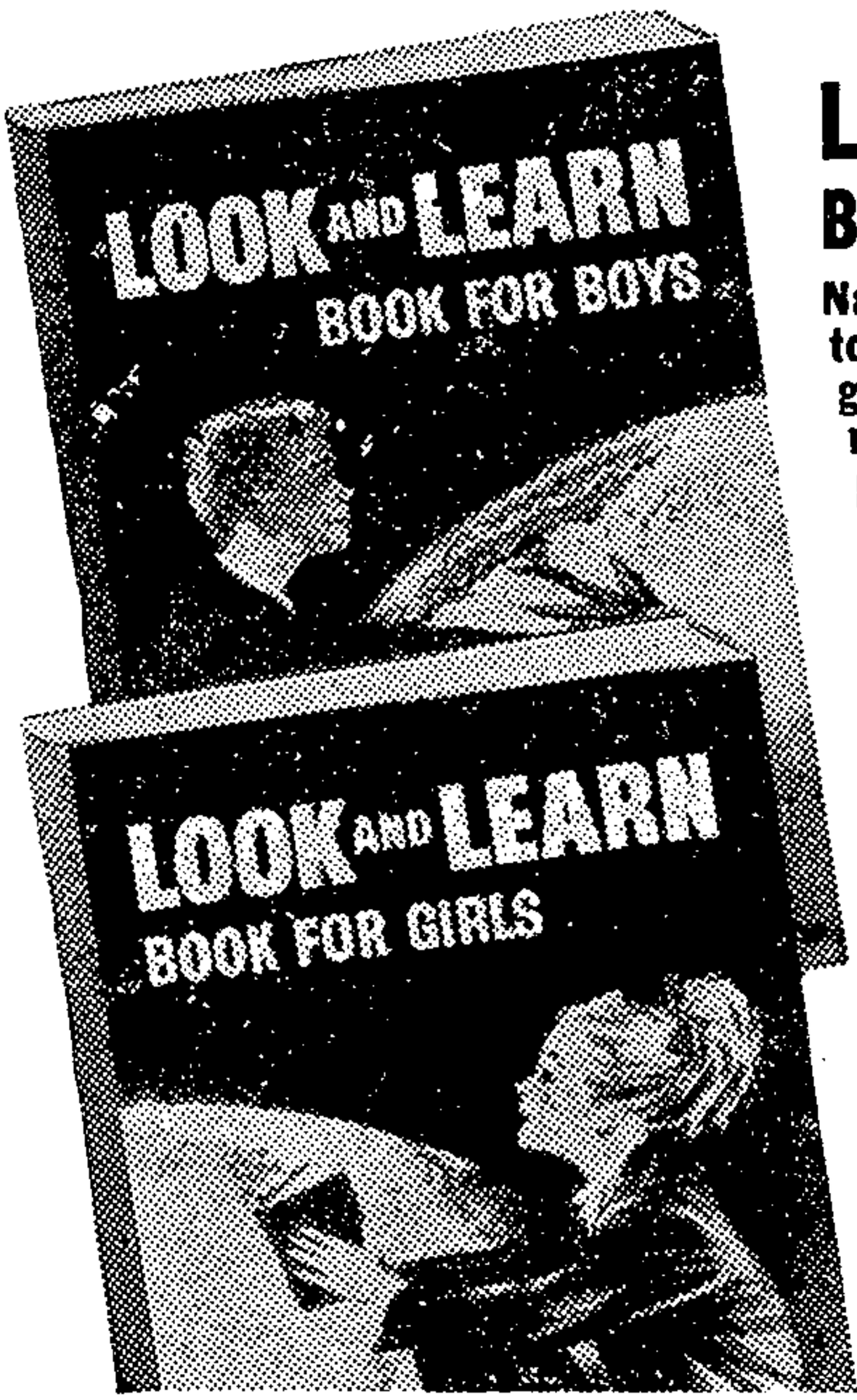

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"And I'm sure of it. Go and see that there's nobody at the door and it's closed tightly."

The boy went, not understanding, but imbued with the sudden importance of his acts and movements.

"You know, Justin, you're a good little fellow."

"Why d'you say that?"

"The corpse is true, the man who ran is true."

The boy raised his head once again and Maigret saw that his lip was trembling.

"And the Judge, who didn't lie, because a Judge wouldn't dare to lie, didn't tell the whole truth."

The room was redolent of Maigret's cold, rum, and tobacco. The smell of the vegetable broth wafted in under the door from the kitchen, and it was still raining silver drops on the black window-panes. Outside, the street was deserted. Was it still a man and a child who found themselves face to face? Or two men? Or two children?

Maigret's head felt heavy, his eyes were watering. His pipe had a strange, sickly taste that he did not find unpleasant, and he remembered the odours of the hospital, the chapel, and the sacristy.

"The Judge didn't tell the whole truth because he wanted to torment you. And you, you didn't tell the whole truth, either. Now I won't have you crying—it's not worth letting the whole world know what's going on between the two of us at this moment. You understand, Justin?"

The boy nodded. "If what you told us hadn't happened at all, the husband at 42 would not have heard running."

"I didn't make it up."

"Exactly. But if it happened as you said, the Judge could not have asserted that he didn't hear anything. And, if the murderer had run in the direction of the barracks, the old man could not have sworn that nobody ran past his house."

The child didn't move; he was staring fixedly at his toes, swinging his feet in space.

"Basically, the Judge was honest when he dared not state that you had gone past his house yesterday morning. But he could perhaps have stated that you didn't pass. That is the truth, because you ran away in the opposite direction. No doubt he was also being truthful when he claimed that no man had run past on the pavement outside his window. For the man didn't go off in that direction."

"What do you know about it?" He had stiffened up, and was staring wide-eyed at Maigret, just as he must have stared the day before at the murderer or the victim.

"Because, inevitably, the man rushed off in the same direction as you, which explains how the husband at 42 heard him pass. Knowing that you had seen him, that you had seen the corpse, that you could get him caught, he ran *after* you."

"If you tell my mother, I'll—"

"Shush. I've no wish to say anything at all to your mother or

anyone else. You see, Justin, my boy, I'm going to talk to you like a man. A murderer with enough intelligence and coolness to make a corpse disappear in a few minutes without leaving the slightest trace would not have been so stupid as to let you run away after what you had seen."

" I don't know."

" But I do. It's my business to know. The most difficult thing is not killing a man: it's getting rid of him afterwards—and this fellow made a magnificent disappearance. He disappeared even although you saw him and you saw the murderer. In other words, the latter was a very strong man. And a very strong man risking his neck would not have let you get away like that."

" I didn't know . . ."

" What didn't you know? "

" I didn't know it was so serious."

" It isn't at all serious, as the whole thing has now been put right."

" You've arrested him? " There was tremendous hope in the way he spoke.

" He will no doubt be arrested very shortly. Sit still—and don't swing your feet."

" I won't move."

" First of all, if the scene had taken place in front of the Judge's, that's to say halfway up the street, you'd have noticed it from farther away, and you'd have had time to run away. That's the only mistake the murderer made, cunning as he was."

" How did you guess? "

" I didn't guess—I, too, was an altar-boy, and I served at the six o'clock Mass. You wouldn't have gone almost a hundred yards down the street without looking in front of you. Therefore the corpse was nearer, much nearer, almost at the corner of the street."

" Five houses farther on."

" You were thinking of something else—your bicycle—and you probably walked twenty yards without seeing anything."

" You can't possibly know."

" And when you saw it you ran towards the place du Congrès to reach the hospital by the other way. The man ran behind you."

" I thought I was going to die of fright."

" He put his hand on your shoulder? "

" He grabbed my shoulders with both his hands. I thought he was going to throttle me."

" He told you to say . . ."

The child was crying, but not sobbing. He was ashen pale, and the tears were rolling slowly down his cheeks. " If you tell my mother, she'll be at me about it all my life. She's always at me."

" He told you to say that it had all happened farther along."

" Yes."

" In front of the Judge's? "

" It was I who thought of the Judge's house—because of putting

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out my tongue at him. He only said towards the other end of the street. And to say that he ran away in the direction of the barracks."

"And it just missed being the perfect crime, for nobody believed you, seeing that there was no murderer, nor corpse nor trace of any kind, and the whole thing seemed impossible."

"But you?"

"Me? I don't count. It's pure chance that I have been an altar-boy and then that I've had a temperature today. What did he promise you?"

"He told me that if I didn't say what he wanted, he would surely find me wherever I went, in spite of the police, and he'd cut my throat like a chicken."

"And then?"

"He asked me what I'd like to have."

"And you replied, 'A bike.'"

"How did you know that?"

"I keep telling you, I was an altar-boy myself."

"And you wanted a bike?"

"That and a lot of things that I'd never had. Why did you say he had bright eyes?"

"I don't know. I didn't see his eyes. He wore thick glasses. But I didn't want them to find him."

"Because of the bike."

"Perhaps. You're going to tell my mother, aren't you?"

"Neither your mother nor anyone else. We're pals, aren't we, you and I? Now, pass me my tobacco again and don't tell Madame Maigret I've smoked three pipes while we've been here. You see grown-ups don't always tell the whole truth, either. What door was it in front of, Justin?"

"The yellow house next to the pork butcher's."

"Go and find my wife."

"Where is she?"

"Downstairs with Inspector Besson, who was so unkind to you."

"And is he going to arrest me?"

"Open the cupboard."

"There you are."

"There's a pair of trousers hanging there."

"What am I to do?"

"In the left-hand pocket you'll find a wallet."

"I've got it."

"In the wallet there are some visiting cards."

"You want them?"

"Give me one. And the pen on the table as well."

And Maigret took it and wrote on the card beside his name: *Credit for one bicycle.*

"Come in, Besson."

Madame Maigret threw a glance at the opaque cloud of smoke that encircled the light veiled with oiled paper, and rushed towards the kitchen, from which there came a smell of burning.

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As for Besson, taking the chair the boy had just got out of, and vouchsafing him only a contemptuous glance, he said, " I have the list you wanted me to draw up. I had better tell you straight away . . ."

" That it's no use. Who lives at 40? "

" One moment." He consulted his notes. " Wait . . . 40. The house has only one tenant."

" I thought as much."

" Oh? " A brief uneasy glance towards the child. " A foreigner, a dealer in precious stones. Name of Frankelstein."

And, from the depths of the pillows, on which he now reclined, Maigret's voice rose in a nonchalant murmur. " A receiver . . ."

" What did you say, Chief? "

" A receiver. And also, perhaps, head of a gang."

" I don't understand."

" Doesn't matter. Be so kind, Besson, as to pass me the bottle of rum that's in the wall cupboard. Quickly before Madame Maigret arrives. I bet my temperature's up to 39.5 . . . the sheets will have to be changed twice tonight. Frankelstein . . . Get a search warrant from the examining magistrate—No, at this hour of night that'll take time, for he's sure to be out playing bridge somewhere. Have you had dinner? I'm waiting for my broth. There are some blank warrants in my desk. Left-hand drawer. Fill one up. Search the place. You're bound to find the corpse even if it means knocking down a cellar wall."

Poor Besson was looking anxiously at his chief and then at the child, who was waiting good as gold in the corner.

" Do it quickly, old chap. If he knows the lad came here this evening, you'll find the bird has flown. He's a smart one, you'll see."

And indeed he was. While the flying squad were ringing his bell, he was trying to make his getaway over the courtyard walls. It took all night to lay hands on him—he was finally caught on the rooftops—while other detectives were searching the house for hours before they found the corpse decomposed in a bath of lime.

Obviously a case of settling an old score. Some fellow, dissatisfied with the boss and feeling cheated, had gone and badgered him at his house in the early hours of the morning; Frankelstein had felled him on the doorstep, never thinking an altar-boy would be coming round the corner at that moment.

" How much? " Maigret had no longer the courage to look at the thermometer himself.

" 39.3."

" You're not cheating? " He knew that she was cheating, and he had a higher temperature, but he didn't care. It was blissfully good to sink into unconsciousness like this, to let yourself slip quickly, dizzily away into a world that was hazy but terribly real. A world where an altar-boy who looked like the young Maigret of other days was running desperately down the street, thinking he was